

Invisible Wounds:
Bringing Awareness to the
Emotional Suffering of Surrendered Shelter Pets

Scars. Open wounds. Broken bones. These are all highly visible signs of the physical suffering that some animals experience as a result of abuse and mistreatment. However, there is a much more prevalent type of animal suffering—one that unfortunately is less recognized, less obvious, and poorly understood. It is the emotional suffering of animals, a particularly common problem in pets who are surrendered to animal shelters (McMillan 185, Pierce).¹

Pet owners surrender pets for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, the family moves and is unable to take their pet. Sometimes, an owner dies and no one else is willing to take care of the pet. In some cases, it's a landlord issue or a breed restriction problem. Whatever the reason, when pets are surrendered to shelters, their lives change dramatically.

Instead of the familiar home and human companionship they're accustomed to, surrendered shelter pets are housed in small cages where they're exposed to diseases, infections, constant noise, and considerable stress. This dramatic change combined with the loss of their family often leads to depression, anxiety, fear, and loneliness—"invisible wounds" that can only be seen through their behaviors. Unfortunately, however, these behaviors are often misinterpreted by potential adopters as undesirable rather than symptoms of emotional distress.

For instance, when surrendered pets become depressed, they often just lie in their cages and won't interact with potential adopters. Even when brought out of their cages, they are reluctant to play or interact. Anxious or fearful pets may tremble, making them appear weak or

sickly; or they may growl or bark, making them seem unfriendly or aggressive. Although these behaviors in surrendered pets are almost always shelter-induced, they lessen the likelihood of adoption, causing these pets to remain in shelters longer and suffer more.

As a Teen Adoption Ambassador (AA) at the Humane Society of Broward County (HSBC) for the past 19 months, I have personally observed the emotional toll that shelter life can have on surrendered pets. As an AA, my job is to foster pets who are identified by HSBC as emotionally distressed, help them overcome their anxiety, fears, and depression, and actively work to find them permanent homes. To date, I have fostered and found homes for 15 emotionally distressed surrendered pets, and it's been a life-changing experience (see Photo 1).



Photo 1: Collage of My AA Pets

The only downside is that because fostered AA pets are no longer in the shelter, exposed to the hundreds of people who visit each week looking for adoptable pets, it tends to take twice as long to find them homes (ASPCA Professional; Mohan-Gibbons et al).ⁱⁱ

So, in an attempt to bring more exposure to the pets in the AA Program and the important work it does for emotionally distressed shelter pets, I decided to use my love for writing and art to write and illustrate two books for HSBC. The first book is an activity book for children to read and work on while they're at the shelter waiting to see adoptable animals. The illustration on the cover is Bear, a special AA dog that I fostered for three months (see Illustration 1). Bear worked very hard to overcome severe physical and emotional trauma, and was eventually adopted by a war veteran with PTSD. Bear is now a certified emotional service animal for the man (see Appendix for Bear's magazine story.)



Illustration 1: Cover of Children's Activity Bookⁱⁱⁱ

Each page of the activity book tells the story of a surrendered pet who found a home through the AA Program and has an activity related to that pet. For example, there is a page about AA dog Taz that has a maze I drew in the shape of Taz's head (see Illustration 2).

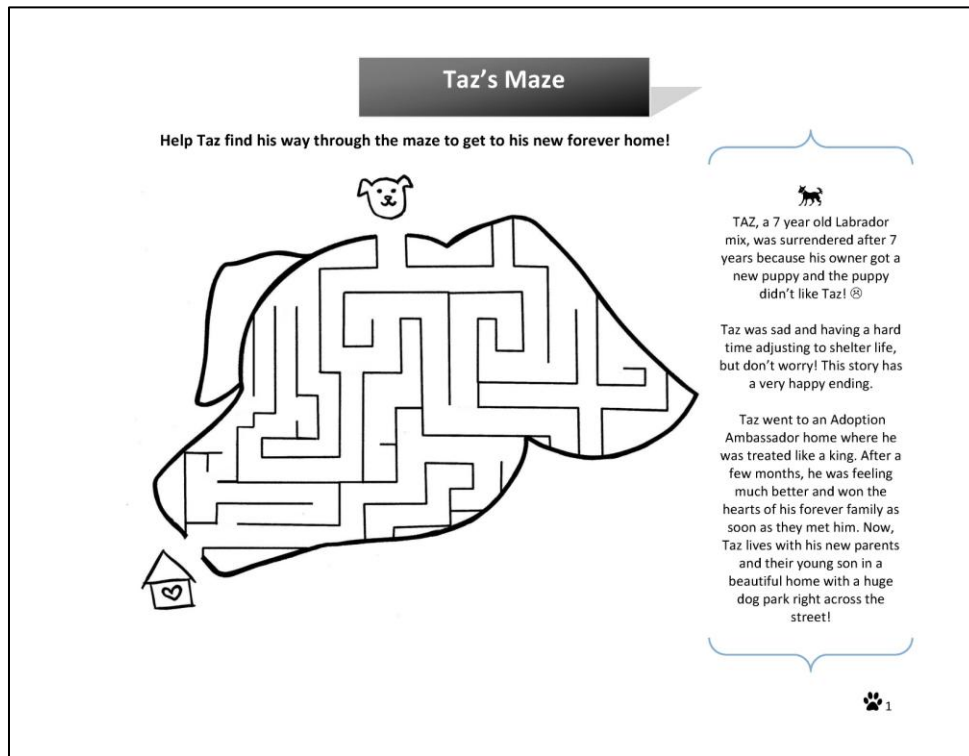


Illustration 2: Taz's Maze

There also is a word search I created for an AA cat named Samba; a connect-the-dots that I made in the shape of Gravy, an AA dog with a unique corkscrew tail; and a secret word find page dedicated to my smallest AA pet, Joey (see Illustrations 3-5). In total, there are eight activities for children to complete, each one highlighting the AA Program and its pets, and a final page for children to write their own story about their visit to HSBC (see Illustration 6).

Samba's Word Search

Find and circle all of the words on the list.

K C D O G Y Z E N I N A C B X R S E N O B E N I L E F S I R E E B S I R F J M J A U J L M N E G V E U H R A B B I T E M O R N L R D N E I R F Y C A I I E E J S N O I T A N O D S C T T L E S U O I R U C B R H R P A O D T S W A L C W R C U O O S N Y D N A H G M H E N W C D Y H E S U U V R Z I E E A H A P R E T L C L O U S D U G I T K U R L T J E O V K S C G P K T L P U T I Q M V E T S I J Q A B W P F E K E P R E E N Q P C B J V Y X R D Z S P R G Y	ADOPTION KITTEN BONES LEASH BREEDS MICROCHIP CANINE PETS CAT PUPPY CLAWS RABBIT CUDDLE RESCUE CURIOUS SHELTER DOG TOYS DONATIONS VOLUNTEER FELINE WAGGING FRIEND WHISKERS FRISBEE FURRY GROOMED
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Although most AA pets are dogs, cats also can be fostered by Adoption Ambassadors. SAMBA was a Siamese sweetie who lived with her Adoption Ambassador for two months until a mom with a special needs child saw her and thought she'd be wonderful addition to their family. Samba now lives with her human mom and human brother and they couldn't be happier!

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Illustration 3: Samba's Word Search

Gravy's Connect-the-Dots

GRAVY, like many dogs at HSBC, was transferred from the Broward County Animal Shelter. He is a Rottweiler mix with a fun-loving and energetic personality, but his cutest feature is his quirky corkscrew tail.

Within a few weeks of going into an Adoption Ambassador home, Gravy found his forever family—a mom with six year old twins who are keeping Gravy very busy. His interesting tail is the talk of all their friends.

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Illustration 4: Gravy's Connect-the-Dots

The second book was written for adults to read while they're waiting at the shelter to see adoptable animals (see Illustration 7). The book explains the emotional struggles that surrendered pets experience in a shelter setting. It also describes the HSBC AA Program, the research on its effectiveness in helping emotionally distressed shelter pets, and tells the "tails" of three AA pets (see Photos 2-5). It ends with information on how to find out which pets are in AA foster homes, how to schedule visits with these pets, and how to become an AA. To cover the printing costs of these books, I obtained donations from two local printers, and the shelter has since written a grant proposal to cover future printing costs.

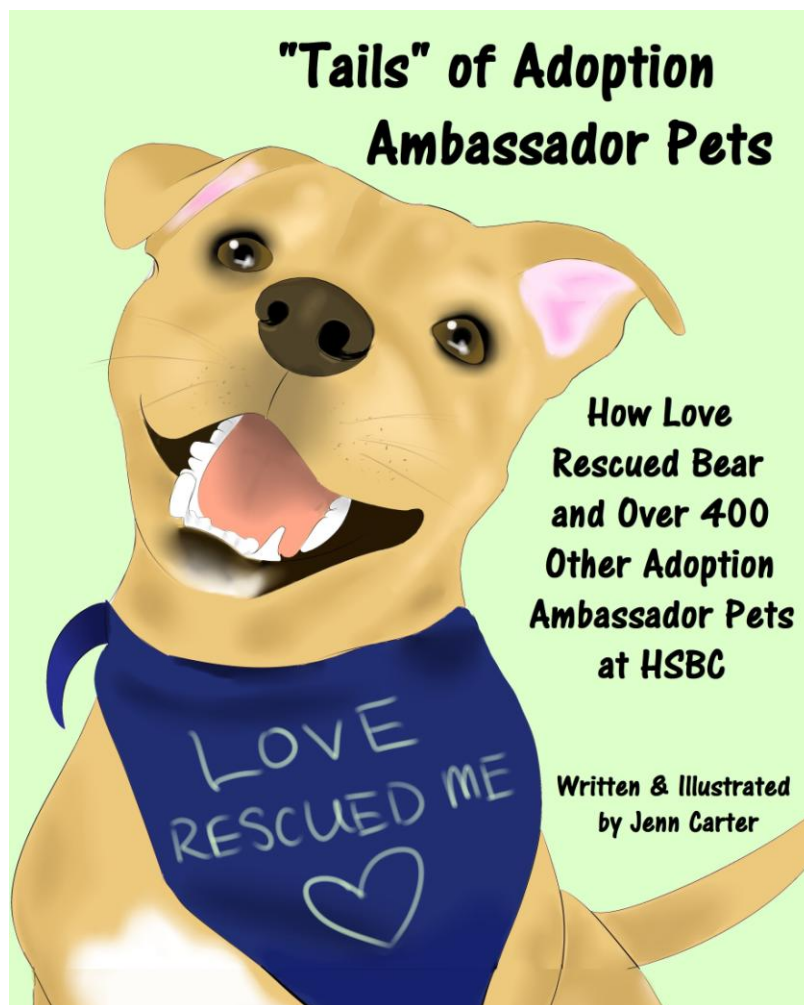


Illustration 7: Cover of Informational Pamphlet for Adults

Just Imagine

Imagine if suddenly everything you know and everyone you love disappeared. Instead of the home you're accustomed to living in, you find yourself confined to a small space surrounded by concrete walls and a glass door. Instead of the comfortable bed you're used to sleeping in, you now sleep on a concrete floor, a thin towel, or a small cot. Although the landlord does her best to keep the place sanitary, diseases are rampant and many of your neighbors are sick. The noise in your new neighborhood is loud and constant, but you have no control over it. In fact, you have no control over anything, including if or when you leave or when you can go outside for fresh air and exercise. Strangers walk by you all the time. Some stop to look, but few talk to you. Most just ignore you, misinterpreting your sadness and confusion as unfriendliness or antisocial tendencies, although nothing could be further from the truth.


The hardest part, however, is that before you were brought here, you had a pretty good life with a family who loved you and took care of you. Although you don't know it, you'll never see them again, and every time someone walks past your door, you raise your head to see if it's your family that has come back for you. Sadly, it never is.

This is the life of a surrendered shelter dog. It happens every day at animal shelters around the country. Families move and can't take their pets. Landlords discover a pet and threaten eviction. The pet's owner dies and family members don't want it. Sometimes, a baby develops an allergy.

In these situations, pets are often surrendered to animal shelters where they are put into a kennel and wait to be adopted. However, for surrendered dogs, adoption doesn't always happen quickly. Because surrendered pets are accustomed to a home and a family, they often become depressed and anxious in shelters, which make the situation worse because dogs who are emotionally distressed often behave in ways that lessen the likelihood of adoption. For example, surrendered dogs may bark a lot or just lie in the back of their kennels and not interact with potential adopters. Because of these perceived "unfriendly" behaviors, surrendered pets often remain in shelters longer, which increases their exposure to contagious diseases such as kennel cough, coccidia, and tape worm, and heightens their stress.

If there was a program designed to help these animals, would you support it?

Well, there is, and it's right here at HSBC! It's called the Adoption Ambassador Program.




The Adoption Ambassador Program

In 2010, at the Louisiana Division of the ASPCA (LA/SPCA), the first Adoption Ambassador (AA) Program was created. It started with a small group of shelter volunteers who not only fostered shelter dogs, but also took them out into the community and actively tried to find them homes. Because the program was so successful, LA/SPCA began recruiting ambassadors from the community; and because that was so successful, the AA Program spread to other states (ASPCA Professional: *The Birth of Adoption Ambassadors*). Fortunately, one of those states was Florida.

In September, 2012, HSBC started its own AA Program to better meet the needs of surrendered pets. Because most of the animals at HSBC are brought in by families who are no longer able to care for them, it's the perfect type of shelter for an AA Program. Surrendered pets are assessed by HSBC staff and those who are having trouble adjusting to shelter life are put into the program. The program also supports homeless pets who need training or medical care to help them become more adoptable. (Although most of the pets who are placed into the AA Program are dogs, occasionally cats who are having difficulty adjusting to the shelter or who are having a hard time getting adopted are put into the program as well.)

Ambassadors are volunteers who attend an orientation session and undergo a criminal background check before they can begin fostering AA pets.¹ Once they're trained and accepted as an ambassador, they select a pet on the AA list to foster. In addition to providing temporary housing for AA pets, they're also responsible for actively trying to find homes for them. They do this by walking their AA pets with brightly colored "Adopt Me" vests on, taking them to pet-friendly community events, making and handing out signs about them, and promoting their availability on social media. They're also responsible for helping them become more adoptable by giving them training, socialization skills, and any medical care they may need.²



¹ HSBC allows adults and teenagers to volunteer as Adoption Ambassadors. However, all Teen Ambassadors must have a parent partner. Teen Ambassadors also receive community service hours for their ambassador work.
² All food, supplies, and medical care for AA animals are provided by HSBC.

Photo 2: Pages 1 and 2 of Informational Pamphlet for Adults

Just Imagine

By spending so much time with their AA pets, ambassadors learn a lot about their personality, needs, and habits, and they use this knowledge to match each pet with the right family. When someone shows an interest in adopting an AA pet, the ambassador interviews the potential adopter(s) to see what kind of pet they're looking for and to determine if they and the AA pet would be a good match. If it seems like it might work out, the ambassador arranges a meeting between the AA pet, the potential adopter(s) and any pets they may already have. If the meeting goes well and everyone agrees that it's a good fit, the ambassador completes the adoption paperwork and has HSBC do a background check to make sure the potential adopter doesn't have a negative history with the shelter. If the background check clears, the ambassador collects the adoption fee and turns the pet over to its new forever family!

It's sad for ambassadors to say goodbye to their AA pets and they do miss them. However, ambassadors know that they're doing a great thing for their AA pets. They also know that when they find a good home for one, they can begin helping another distressed shelter animal find its forever family. Because they open their hearts and their homes to these animals, ambassadors are saving lives and ending suffering one adoption at a time, and the great news is that preliminary research suggests that ambassador programs like the one at HSBC accomplishes both of these things.

After studying two groups of dogs—those who were adopted directly from the shelter and those who were adopted through the AA program—LA/SPCA found that although it took slightly longer for AA dogs to get adopted, the return rate for AA dogs (2 percent) was significantly lower than for dogs adopted directly from the shelter (14 percent). In addition, the researchers discovered that AA dogs seem to be getting adopted by a new type of adopter. For example, only 30.3 percent of the people who adopted AA dogs had previously adopted shelter animals; most (46.2 percent) had purchased their pets from breeders.

Although more research is needed, this preliminary study suggests that AA programs provide more opportunities for shelter dogs to be adopted by opening up a new market of potential adopters and adoption opportunities. In addition, not only does the program increase capacity at shelters, it improves the quality of life for AA animals, decreases the likelihood of an adopted animal being returned, and saves many lives (ASPCA Professional, *The Research*).

Since it began in September, 2012, HSBC's AA program has adopted over 400 surrendered and homeless pets, and this number grows each week.

Here are a few of their very special stories ...

Bear's Story

Hello! I'm Bear, a Black Mouth Cur mix. My story is pretty unbelievable, but it's one hundred percent true, and it's all because of the Adoption Ambassador Program.

I came to HSBC with two broken back legs. Dr. Kashner, an HSBC volunteer veterinarian, did a great job operating on my legs; he put pins in them to hold the broken bones together, then put casts on my legs to keep everything in place while they healed. Rachel, the AA Coordinator, realized that I would heal faster if I had a quiet place to stay and a family who could help me get around, so she called an ambassador family who took me in.

Everyone thought it would be hard for me to walk around at first, but I quickly got the hang of it! My ambassador family loved me a lot, and made sure that I rested and didn't get hurt while I was at their house. They brought me to HSBC every week for check-ups, and after a few months, both of my legs had healed completely. I was ready to find my forever family!

My AA family interviewed a few people who wanted to adopt me, but none of them were quite right. Then along came a guy who was really impressed by the way I had come back from my injuries. He called me a fighter, and as it turns out, he was a fighter, too! As a former U.S. soldier who had PTSD, he told my ambassador family that he could identify with everything I had been through and he thought we'd make a great team.

My AA family arranged a meeting to see how he and I would get along, and it was a perfect match! He adopted me that same day and I have been living with him ever since. He's a great dad and I love him a lot. He even created a Facebook page for me called "The Life and Adventures of Bear." If you're interested, you can follow me and see what I've been up to, but that's not the end of my story. It actually gets better!

I was such a good companion that my dad and his doctor thought that I might be able to actually help my dad with his PTSD, so my dad took me to a training program for service animals. I did really well in the program and now I'm a certified Emotional Support Animal! Can you believe it? My dad helped me by giving me a forever home, and now I'm helping him. I think that makes us an amazing team, and I'll always be grateful to the AA Program and my AA family for helping me find such a great human to spend the rest of my life with.




Photo 3: Pages 3 and 4 of Informational Pamphlet for Adults

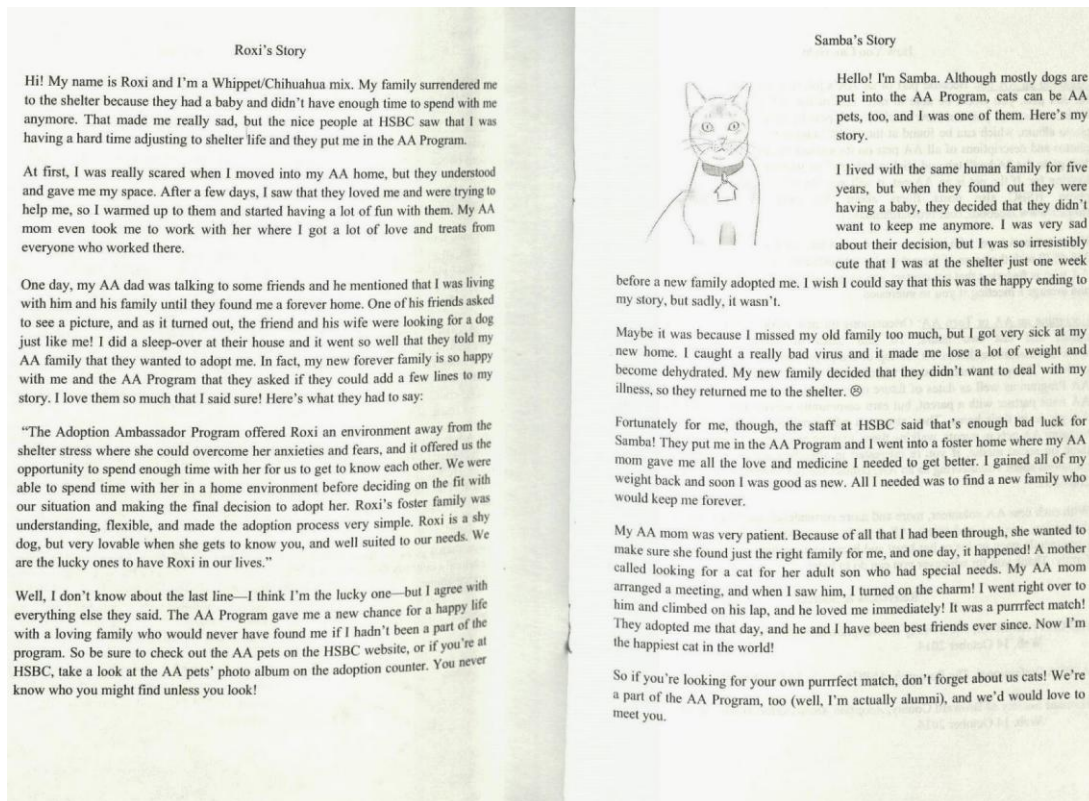


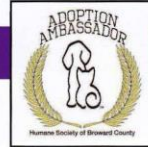
Photo 4: Pages 5 and 6 of Informational Pamphlet for Adults

Having these two books at the shelter serves three purposes: 1) it helps capture an important audience that AA pets in foster homes can't normally capture, which are the hundreds of adults and children who come to the shelter each week looking for adoptable pets, 2) it brings awareness to the invisible wounds suffered by surrendered shelter pets, and 3) it provides information to potential adopters about how they can reduce these animals' emotional distress by adopting them and/or volunteering as an AA. Clearly, AA Programs like the one at HSBC significantly improve the quality of life and help alleviate the suffering of emotionally distressed surrendered pets (ASPCA Professional). It is my hope that the two books I created will further improve their lives by making their invisible wounds more visible so that children and adults who visit the shelter understand the plight of surrendered pets and consider giving one of these deserving pets what they lost when they were surrendered—a forever family.

(Word Count: 992 excluding citations, headers, and endnotes)

Appendix

ADOPTION AMBASSADORS



The Story of Bear

In April of 2014 we had a call from our friends at Broward County Animal Care and Adoption to ask if we could help with Bear, a young dog whose legs had been injured. We agreed...and so began our journey with Bear.

Bear was having trouble walking on his left rear leg, and once we ordered X-rays we could see that he'd suffered fairly serious injuries to both legs: There was a mid-shaft fracture of the right femur and a distal spiral fracture of the left tibia. After his initial surgery, Bear went into an Adoption Ambassador foster home for the quiet and stress-free recovery time he needed. The wonderful Adoption Ambassador family cared for Bear for three months, bringing him back and forth to the shelter for his many follow up visits and surgeries. In addition to managing his medical care, his foster family worked on basic training with Bear, bringing him to the shelter for sessions with volunteer trainer Susan Claire, CPDT-KA.



Bear recovers from his first surgery.

Bear had his initial surgery at the shelter on April 17, 2014, with pins being inserted in both legs to repair the damage. We estimate his legs were fractured for at least two weeks before receiving this necessary surgery that saved his life. Bear has received five surgeries, with the last being performed in July 2014 to remove the pins. The surgeries and the medications that Bear received saved his life, but his road to recovery was not over. After his final surgery Bear needed to rebuild muscle strength in his back legs and learn how to be an active dog again.



Bear's happier now that his casts are removed.

On August 1, 2014 Bear's hero arrived in the form of Eligio B., a United States Veteran, who adopted Bear and welcomed him into his Boynton Beach home. So, we're thrilled to say that Bear's sad story has a very happy ending.

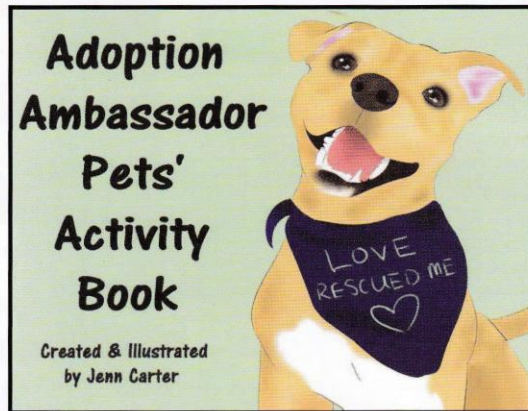
We received an update from Eligio in October that Bear passed his training to become an Emotional Support Animal for Eligio.



Bear and his dad Eligio

Bear is now equipped with the skills necessary to help Eligio with his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Eligio also informed us that Bear's legs are 100% healed and he has resumed normal activities. Bear accompanies Eligio everywhere and the two are best friends.

We recently received even more good news about Bear – he's become a cover model! Bear is featured in two books -- a children's activity book and a book for adults, created and illustrated by HSBC Teen Adoption Ambassador Jennifer Carter, a 15-year-old student at North Broward Preparatory School.



15-year-old Jennifer Carter featured Bear on the cover of her Adoption Ambassador Pets' Activity Book.

The children's book is 11 pages of fun activities including a crossword puzzle, word search, word scramble, and Sudoku game. Each page has a unique activity highlighting an Adoption Ambassador pet that found a home through the program, which is how Bear found his forever home.

Success Stats	
September, October and November 2014	
Adoptions:	33
Average days in AA home:	40
Active Ambassador Families	65
Flunkies (adopted their AA dogs).....	3
Adoptions since program began	385 (Aug. 2012 – Nov. 2014)

The Adoption Ambassador program is made possible by support from the Mary N. Porter Designated Fund, David W. Leonard Fund, Francis and Bessie McDwyer Fund, and Helen Victoria Foote Fund of the Community Foundation of Broward.

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ⁱ Although historically animal scientists have been reluctant to acknowledge animal emotions, recent advances in affective neuroscience research have led to a professional consensus that animals actually do experience emotions in ways very similar to humans (see Špinka, Marek. "Social Dimension of Emotions and Its Implication for Animal Welfare." *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 138.3-4 (2012): 170-181. Print).

ⁱⁱ Research on AA Programs has found that the mean number of days for AA pets to be adopted tends to be longer than in-shelter pets. For example, at the Charleston Animal Society, the mean number of days for AA pet adoptions was 25 (with the longest being 82 days) compared to 12 days for in-shelter dogs (with the longest being 35 days). The reference for these results is in “Works Cited”—the ASPCA Professional citation.

ⁱⁱⁱ I drew the illustration on the book covers using a computer drawing pad called Paint Tool Sai. I drew some of the illustrations inside the books by hand and some using Paint Tool Sai.