

# NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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## 'Adopt-a-Thon' nearly clears crowded shelter

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Current Staff Writer

An abnormal sort of quiet had settled upon the Washington Animal Rescue League by Monday.

"I've never seen it like this, so empty," said Jim Monsma, director of communications at the 71 Oglethorpe St. NW shelter. "It's like a ghost town."

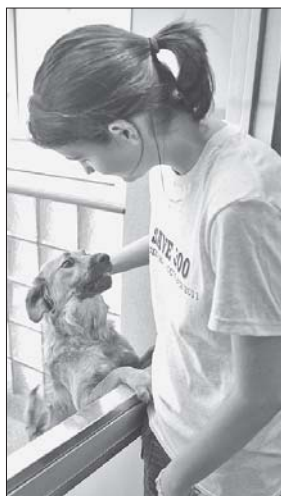
Just the Friday before, the shelter had been swollen to capacity with 125 dogs and cats. The animals had come from all over the place — from regions hit by floods and tornados, from a hoarder in upstate New York, from other shelters in the region that ran out of space.

"Shelters are always slammed during summers," Monsma said, since it's a popular time for moving. Some people even give up their pets when they're going on vacation, he said.

But over the weekend, the majority of the animals at the Takoma shelter moved out into new homes.

For 33 straight hours on Saturday and Sunday, the rescue league kept its doors open for its first-ever "Adopt-a-Thon" event. Seventy-five volunteers helped out, and a half-dozen volunteers and staffers even camped out in the building Saturday night.

The marathon offered a streamlined process for pet adoptions, waiving normal fees and allowing



people to pay whatever they could afford for their new pets.

Things started in a frenzy on Saturday morning, volunteers said. One family showed up at 5 a.m. to be first in line, and by the time volunteers arrived at 7, "the lines were already pretty long," said volunteer Anna Colb.

The pace had slowed down some by Saturday evening.

"It's been pretty phenomenal," volunteer Jamie Hutton said around 6:30 p.m. "We're almost out of dogs."

Those remaining at that hour included Buckaroo, a hound mix; and Oh! Susanna, a black lab. Some leapt up excitedly at each



Bill Petros/The Current

**Laura Wallach and Scott Ressler, above, were among the many area residents to find dogs and cats to adopt at the Washington Animal Rescue League's all-weekend event.**



visitor, some stared up with sad or wary eyes, and others napped through the activities.

One woman cooed into the stall of a tail-thumping young pit bull mix. "I'm trying to take you home," she told the dog. "I want to take you home so bad."

A shelter volunteer later informed the woman she couldn't adopt the dog, because the area where she lives — Prince George's County — bans pit bulls.

The cat section was more crowded Saturday evening, with several felines roaming free on the floor of the room. A few kittens remained up for adoption, alongside a couple of memorable characters: Cirro, the dainty cat with a patch of gray fur where its left eye should be, and Amelia, the chunky three-legged cat who had survived a run-in with a car.

The cats weren't moving out of the shelter as quickly as the dogs, Monsma said, but that follows normal shelter patterns.

"It's not hard to get a cat," he said. Many people end up taking in a stray, or adopting cats from friends or acquaintances — "A coworker says, 'My cat just had kittens,'" he said.

By the end of Adopt-a-Thon at

8 p.m. Sunday, 26 cats remained in the shelter, and only four dogs.

The total — 113 animals — "is as good as we [normally] do in a month," Monsma said.

But the quick turnaround of adoptions inspired a mix of praise and skepticism, said Mary Jarvis, the animal league's chief operating officer. "There's criticism of this as much as there is excitement," she said.

Jarvis emphasized, though, that she had seen "very high-quality adopters" on Saturday, including "people who have adopted from us before, and people who already have animals."

And Monsma said while there is certainly concern about the qualifications of new owners, his shelter — and others — are generally becoming less restrictive with pet adoptions these days. "This is the way we're going," he said. "We're trying to be friendlier to adopters," rather than scaring them away with obstacles like "invasive questionnaires."

During the weekend, adoption procedures skipped some of the traditional steps, such as a home visit with the potential new owner. "We're putting more faith in the adopters," said volunteer Hutton.

Adopt-a-Thon participants filled out an application, presented ID and picked out their animal. Then they sat down for an interview with an adoption counselor — a meeting that could be "as short as 15 minutes" for people with extensive pet-owning experience, Monsma said, or longer for first-time owners. The point was to "make sure you have realistic expectations" about caring for an animal, he said.

With some animals, the owner would then be required to meet with a veterinarian or behavioral specialist.

Then — after signing a contract and paying whatever fee they chose — the owner could leave the building with their new pet.

Jarvis said adopters on Saturday had paid "as little as \$20 and as much as \$500."

On Monday Monsma reported that the shelter's totals averaged about \$75 per adoption. (The fees normally range from \$150 to \$250 for dogs and \$50 to \$100 for cats.)

As for the uneasy sense of calm that filled the shelter after the weekend marathon, Monsma predicted it wouldn't last long: The rescue league already has new animals coming in by the truckload to fill its empty stalls.

"We'll be at full capacity again by Saturday," he said.

More information about the Washington Animal Rescue League and the weekend event is available at warl.org.

