

# Miracles Delivered Daily

Is it true, all this good stuff they say about the San Francisco SPCA? A volunteer sees for herself on the adoption front lines.

BY BARBARA SAUNDERS

ONE DAY, staffers at the Maddie's Center dog desk asked me to take Beauty, a German shepherd mix, and "tucker her out." As I approached her room, Beauty saw me coming with the leash and treats, leapt several feet into the air, and hurled her seventy pounds against the glass door of her condo.

Her profile sheet read: "Skill Level: HIGH." (The profile sheets let volunteers know whether they have received the training required to work with that particular dog. I'd recently qualified.) Prospective adopters must have been apprehensive, as I was, at the prospect of handling such a fireball: She'd been at the San Francisco SPCA more than 200 days.

A few minutes into our session in the playroom, I discovered that Beauty's charms run deeper than her shiny black coat, brindle-colored feet, and cute, floppy ears: The dog is an athletic marvel. With the grace and rhythm of an Olympian, she chased ball after Frisbee after toy, jumping to intercept each in flight, landing, then dropping her catch just in time to grab the next.

Weeks later, as I entered the adoption center one afternoon, I saw a woman standing at the counter. At her feet sat a bag of the dog food Maddie's gives away as part of the adoption package, and scrawled on the bag, in big, black-marker letters was the magic word: "Beauty!!!" To the delight of the staff and volunteers who'd come to love her, Beauty had, at last, met her match. The adopter was a lean, fit woman sporting outdoor gear. A picture-perfect pair.

I've learned that miracles happen daily at Maddie's, where peo-

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*Clyde*

ple looking for best friends find homeless dogs and cats just waiting to share unconditional love.

Though I'd volunteered for several months from home (writing articles for *Our Animals*), I had not seen the San Francisco SPCA adoption phenomenon up-close. But when both of my elderly cats died (I had adopted one from the SF/SPCA in 1990) — and I found myself "between jobs" — I decided to indulge my animal side and volunteer a lot of time at the SF/SPCA. A lifelong cat guardian,

I also had fond memories of the dog I'd enjoyed as a child, so I signed up for the twin occupations of cat socializer and dog socializer and soon began my training.

Thanks to all my life experience, I already knew a lot about handling (and not handling) cats. Every feline at the SF/SPCA gets a rating between 1 (easy-going) and 5 (do not pet). In the SF/SPCA scheme, Level 3 felines may nip or swat when annoyed. To me, that is average cat behavior.

The dog side was a different story. I found out that it's not just the dogs that get trained. It can be a humbling experience for a lifelong pet enthusiast like me to learn that "tried-and-true" animal handling techniques are no-nos. SF/SPCA dog volunteers are steeped in positive reinforcement techniques. That means using a food treat to lure a dog into a "down" rather than what I learned — pushing down his back and pulling his front legs out from under him.

Six months earlier, a dog like Beauty would have scared me. But after a few weeks of training, I could look at her with new understanding. She wasn't a "bad" dog or even uncontrollable. Rather, she had energy to burn and needed someone to help her direct it. My training gave me the confidence to handle her, she responded well to me, and in a small way I contributed to her success in finding that special someone.

After seeing that Beauty's future looked bright, I hurried over to the "cat side," which was still busy with the tail end of kitten season (roughly between April and November, when cat fecundity peaks.) A soft-spoken, twenty-something couple was auditioning black kittens. After cuddling a few, they decided they liked Devin's face the best. Devin had survived only through heroic efforts by the SF/SPCA veterinary staff. He developed an intestinal blockage that threatened his life, and for a few days it was touch and go: "Every morning, the first thing we checked was whether Devin pooped last night," one veterinary technician said.

The gentle couple sat patiently through the instructions for special feeding and medical follow-up for the frail but frisky little kitten. Another happy ending.

It's a treat for me to visit all the adoptable animals, of course. Another privilege of volunteering is seeing the animals at the SF/SPCA that aren't yet ready for adoption. Such as Henry. This tiny, one-month-old, orange kitten — eyes still baby blue — was

curled up with a "momcat," a stuffed-animal toy with a heartbeat and heater. But he quickly walked on quivering legs to the front of his quarters and called out vigorously when a few of us volunteers approached. Orphaned youngsters like Henry may spend several weeks under SF/SPCA medical supervision, including at-home foster care. By the time they get moved to Maddie's, these little ones are not only healthy, they're exceptionally friendly due to all the attention and handling they've received.

While kittens and puppies go quickest, Maddie's places a phenomenal number of older pets, including cats and dogs age ten or more. Often, these older animals are new companions for other pets who've lost a sibling, or for people whose lifestyles or personal inclinations don't accommodate the extensive training young animals need. Young or old, sweet or feisty, robust or frail, a dog or cat in Maddie's has a clean, safe place to stay, plus all the love, food, and medical care he or she needs until the day of adoption.

At times, there is a strange, singles-bar aspect to the place. Some animals are so beautiful, so sweet, so cute, or show so well that their homelessness doesn't last a week-end. I never had the chance to walk Razor, a blue-eyed husky mix with a fluffy coat and henna coloring. And I snuck in a visit with the mysterious Hammett while his adopter, the friend of an SF/SPCA worker, filled out paperwork. When I sat down on the floor of his condo, this 15-pound Himalayan cat walked behind me, stood on his hind legs, and put his belly to my back and his chin on my shoulder. Irresistible.

And, apparently, playing hard-to-get still works in the 21st century: A thirty-something couple roamed the shelter, visiting various cats, waiting for "that spark." A frisky black and white kitten played with the toy they offered, then mischievously climbed his cat tree. A chubby, affectionate black, long-haired girl rubbed against them, purring and chirping. Then there was Bubbles.

The cat-savvy, respectful couple sat quietly on the floor and waited for this middle-aged tortoise-shell kitty to approach. They tried coaxing her in a soothing voice. They tried ignoring her. No dice. She sat majestically on her perch, occasionally faking them out by standing up to stretch or to walk in a circle and sit down again. Then closing time arrived, and the couple left empty-handed. The next morning, they were waiting at the front door when Maddie's staff unlocked it. "Bubbles intrigued us," the woman said. Half an hour and an uninvited-but-accepted cheek-rubbing session later, Bubbles went home with them.

Invariably I fall in love with the oddballs — Scarlet, the dog with a badly healed broken leg that doesn't bend; Oliver, the gray and white kitty with no eyes, and the sweet, stoic, brown tabby, one-eyed Jack; Beethoven, the deaf dog; and Klondike, the white, FIV-positive cat with so many toes on his feet, he looks like he's wearing snowshoes. In the weeks that closed out the year 2004, every one of these animals was somebody's first choice.

In early January, Beauty's proud, new mom, Susan, e-mailed the SF/SPCA with great news. "As I told you," she wrote, "I was taking Beauty to Oregon ... We have bonded and gone on some hikes in the woods up here, and she is quite considerate and protective of me as we walk the trails."

Susan added, "She appears to be perfectly housetrained, no accidents at all, and [she's] calm riding in the car ... I have been able to let her off the leash and she loves to run fast and play. She's quite intelligent and comes back to get back on the leash. She's a very sociable, playful dog — you did a good job training her."

When I began volunteering at Maddie's, I daydreamed about bonding with the animals, then watching them "walk into the sunset." All my daydreams have come true. 🐾

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