

Nobody's said that they're missing a dog. We can't keep the dog. Would you come pick it up?" They will.

"I've picked up a lot of dogs. A lot," says Trish a tad wearily. Usually, she will go out to the caller's house, locate the dog and watch its body language carefully. If the dog seems "used to people," Trish will calmly approach it, and armed with little more than a plastic mesh leash and a dog treat she will take control of the animal, load it into a truck cage, take it to the Animal Shelter and put it in the "strays" kennel. Naturally, she checks the animal for some indication of ownership. "In most cases they have a collar on but no identification."

Back at her office at the other end of the Animal Shelter, Trish will coordinate with Shelter Director, Beth Meier so that if the pet's owner calls, they can make a match. And Beth pleads to the general public that if you are missing a pet, "please, please, please, call the Animal Shelter, because a lot of people don't." She also strongly recommends keeping an ID on your pets...always. "Write something indelibly on the collar or harness so we know who you are. We can get a dog back to you a lot faster." She also says information about lost pets is kept in a book at the Shelter for a year, so don't give up.

Let's say the owner of this stray does not call. After the sixth day, if he has no collar with ID, he becomes the property of Orange County and the Shelter folks get to work on transforming him into a healthy, vaccinated, wormed, sterilized adoptable pound puppy. In the bad old days, after the sixth day, they euthanized him... or worse yet, sold him for medical research. That hasn't happened in decades.

Trish reaches for a copy of the Orange County Animal Control Ordinance. She points out that dogs are not allowed to run at large at any time in this county. She reads the definition of running at large: "roaming or running off the property of its owner or custodian and not under the owner's or custodian's immediate control." Plain enough; your dog can run free in your yard, but as soon as he crosses onto somebody else's, he's running at large.

Even more widely disregarded is the ordinance on dog tags. How many pet owners comply with or even know about the law that every dog in this county must have and display on his collar an Orange County dog tag?...that it is only obtainable from the Treasurer's Office or the Animal Shelter with a current rabies vaccination certificate? Not many. Tags are cheap...\$10 for dogs, only \$2 if they're spayed or neutered. All tags were due for renewal at the end of last month.

There's an old joke among Animal Control Officers: "We have the cleanest dogs in the county; they're never wearing their collars and their



Animal Control Officer, Trish Dahl tries on one of several pairs of bite gloves that she keeps in her truck. Although she has been bitten in the line of duty, she can usually catch and handle most strays with her bare hands, a leash, and a treat.

Photo by Phil Audibert

IDs, because 'he's just had a bath.'" Trish smirks at the often-heard "excuse" for not having tags on a dog. "A lot of our time is spent educating. It's giving the owner the chance to be a responsible owner," adding, "Given the opportunity, most citizens will comply."

A tour of Trish's truck shows the variety of calls to which she responds.

Bolt cutters: A storm has come up; a tree has fallen across a fence; livestock is out on the road; you might need bolt cutters to cut a chained gate to usher the loose animals into a secure field.

Horse feed: "When they're in the middle of the road and you want to get them out, the best way to entice them is to pick up that bucket, put some feed in it and shake it."

Catch pole: "You have to know how to use it so you don't injure the dog," cautions Trish

Bite gloves with Teflon inserts: "For when you're dealing with feral cats or small dogs that have a tendency to bite."

A stretcher: "We get called out for a dog that's been hit by a car, and we don't want to stress him out by just picking him up and throwing him in the truck."

There is no after hours emergency vet hospital in Orange County. Usually dogs and cats are hit on the highway at night. "We bring them back and try to make them as comfortable as possible."

There's an old joke among Animal Control Officers: "We have the cleanest dogs in the county; they're never wearing their collars and their IDs, because 'he's just had a bath.'"

Trish has euthanized gravely injured dogs and cats to put them out of their misery, "but we don't do that by the side of the road. It puts ourselves in danger. We bring them back to the Shelter."

Just about the strangest thing she had to do was pick up an Emu. And then there was this herd of goats that kept getting out. "Goats aren't easy to keep; they're Houdini animals," smiles Trish. "We had 14 or 15 out in the middle of Route 20." With the help of several Sheriff's Deputies, they corralled them, eased them onto a livestock trailer, and put up a makeshift pen behind the Animal Shelter where they stayed until they were relocated to an approved animal refuge.

"I have the utmost respect for our farmers here in Orange County," she says. "They are a great group of people." Packs of dogs running and killing livestock are hard for her to catch in the act. But the farmers do. "They have a clear understanding of what the law allows. They do what they have to do."

Trish knows both sides of this business. She started as an Animal Caretaker in 2001 at the old Shelter at the airport. "I was on the other side taking care of the animals," she recalls. Then she attended Basic Law Enforcement and Animal Control Schools at the local Criminal Justice Academy and since 2003, has had "the unique experience of being able to see it from both sides." Acting Supervisor, Trish and her sidekick, Don are fully deputized and answer to the Sheriff's Department, not the Animal Shelter.

"With the Shelter we do everything to maintain a cooperative relationship, even though we're not actually a part of the Shelter," points out Trish. "We bring the dogs in here to them, and we work with them... what's best for the dog or cat."

Trish has been bitten by dogs in the line of duty. She has also been vaccinated for rabies. "I enjoy my job. I do," she insists. "I love my job," adding with a confident smile, "I can't see myself doing anything other than this."

What makes her happy? "The best part is when clearly someone has lost their pet. It has run away from home for whatever reason, and the owner is frantic and calling and giving us descriptions, and they are wearing their collars and IDs, and all they want is for their pet to come home." She pauses and smiles. "When you manage to make that happen, that is a good day."



The following personal ad was spied a few years ago in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*:

SINGLE BLACK FEMALE seeks male companion-ship, ethnicity unimportant. I'm a very good looking girl who LOVES to play. I love long walks in the woods, riding in your pick-up truck, hunting, camping, fishing trips, and cozy winter nights lying by the fire. Candlelight dinners will have me eating out of your hand. Rub me the right way and watch me respond. I'll be at the front door when you get home from work, wearing only what nature gave me. Kiss me and I'm yours. Call xxx-xxxx and ask for Daisy.

More than 15,000 men found themselves talking to the local Humane Society about an eight-week old Labrador Retriever.

POUND PUPPIES

That story would bring a smile to anyone's face, even the busy staff at the already overcrowded new Animal Shelter on Porter Road. And they wistfully wish as many people would call to adopt some of their Daisies... or at least come in and play with them for an hour or two.

"Hello, my name is Virginia," reads a card attached to the door of one of the caged runs. "I arrived here in January. I'm a beagle. I'm small. I'm very shy, but I need a slow, loving hand that will be gentle." Maybe not quite as appealing as Daisy, Virginia peers out through the wire mesh, her graying

muzzle a dead giveaway for her advanced years. Will she find happiness with a loving family? Maybe. Maybe not.

We don't know Virginia's story. She may have been what's known as an "animal surrender"...where people just show up with the pet and ask the Shelter to take it off their hands for them. And isn't it ironic that the Shelter is within a stone's throw of the landfill. You can drop off your trash and your unwanted dog or cat in the same trip.

The good folks at the Shelter will take this trash. "We're here to help both the people and the animals,"



"Pick me, pick me," a litter of 10 puppies vies for attention. They will have to wait, however, until they are wormed, have all their shots, and are spayed or neutered before they can go home with anyone. Above, Mopp, a hound mix, cuddles with Orange County Animal Shelter Director, Beth Meier. "Mopp is very gentle," says Beth. "He's great with other dogs. He loves children of any age." But she cautions, "He's still a puppy. He's only 10 months. He's got some learning to do."

Photos by Phil Audibert

explains Shelter Director, Beth Meier. She patiently ticks off the excuse list. "We've had people who've moved into Orange County; they don't want their hardwood floors scratched; so in comes the dog. They're tired of the dog; they got it as a puppy; it's not trained; they have other dogs outside, and the dogs keep running off because they have no fence; the dog is getting old and it's getting too sad to watch it die; they just had a baby; they got a new job...pretty much anything you can possibly think of."

For many, like the elderly who are moving into a facility that does not allow pets, it is a gut-wrenching experience; they're giving up an old friend. "It's very hard for them and we help them," says Beth compassionately. Then her eyes narrow. "For some people, the dog is just a commodity." And when the commodity loses value or becomes inconvenient, it is tossed out with the trash.

Still, it is far, far better that these unwanted animals come to the Shelter than meet a different fate... one of cruelty, abuse and neglect. And, Beth's seen it all. Viewer discretion advised for the next paragraph...this is not pretty:

"Dogs with their collars so in-grown into their necks they have to be surgically cut out of the neck. We've had cases where the dogs are not fed properly, where the dogs are standing in inches of fecal matter. We had a case where five came in at one time, they were so far gone..." she lets the sentence trail off. A deep breath and she continues. "They weren't treated for parasites, they were starving; one of them died that



Shelter employee, Rae Lynn Swart sanitizes every cage inside and out to prevent the spread of disease among the population of dogs being put up for adoption.

Photo by Phil Audibert

night from blood loss he was so eaten up with hookworms, so dehydrated, you lift the scruff of his neck, the fur would just sit there. His gums were white."

What some people do, and don't do, to their "pets."

Ask Beth what's the one piece of advice she'd give pet owners, she passionately says, "Pay attention to your pet. Spend time with them. Don't just throw them outside. Even if your dog is a guard dog, go out there and spend some time with him, show him that you care about him. Don't just leave him

out there to go crazy. Pat him on the head. Scratch him behind the ears, give him a treat. Do SOMETHING," she implores.

And then, if you still can't keep the animal or take care of it properly, if you've suddenly been deployed to Iraq, bring the pet to the Animal Shelter. They will take it. "If you ever need us, we're here to help you," promises Beth. And she and her "really, really good crew" of two full-time and six part-time employees, along with the volunteers and the Humane Society, will do everything they can to make the animal healthy, happy, and not homeless.

It's a typical morning at the Orange County Animal Shelter. Food bowls have been prepared and delivered to 60 dogs in the outdoor portion of the kennels. The guillotine doors separating indoors from out, descend and the crew starts cleaning for the day. Annette Dodson in the cat room, painstakingly cleans and sanitizes each cage. In the dog kennels, Rae Lynn Swart and her daughter, Stephanie poop-scoop and pre-rinse each run. "We use bleach and we scrub down the walls and the floors and the grates and the doors, then we rinse it, squeeze it, use towels to help dry and then we set fans up and when everything is dry, we'll let the dogs in and clean the outside," elaborates Beth Meier. They go through this same procedure "seven days a week. We are very, very thorough because that's how we make sure none of the dogs gets sick."

Next, the crew will administer in-house medical treatments and take spay/neuter cases to the vet. They also temperament test here, treat heartworm and mange, vaccinate, and worm. Unless the animal is going to an approved refuge or rescue group, "we will not release under any circumstances an animal that has not been sterilized," says Beth definitively.

The new Orange County Animal Shelter is a magnificent facility. It is divided into three sections: the first for dogs who are ready to be adopted. The second section is for strays who have not been claimed by their owners or are awaiting shots and medical treatment before being put up for adoption. The third section is a kind of Purgatory... for dogs who are Animal Control cases... the biters, the neglected ones. On this particular morning there are two dogs here who ganged up on their neighbor's dog and killed it. They await their fate pending an appeal in court. The other dog in Purgatory is a neglect case...he had to be shaved to get rid of the lice-infested mats on his neck and ears.

And then there are the cats, 692 of them during all of last year, many of them feral and forever wild. These un-adoptable animals will be sent to Rikki's Refuge, where they will live out



Photo by Phil Audibert

Orange County Animal Shelter Director, Beth Meier entertains "Cat" while employee Annette Dodson cleans his cage. The shelter hosted 692 cats last year.

their days in a semi-wild but controlled environment with shelter, fresh food and water provided. The adoptable cats, meanwhile, perform all manner of cute antics in their cages, hoping you'll choose them over their neighbor.

There's also an isolation room here, inhabited this morning by an adorable little rough-coated terrier just begging to be petted. But you can't. He's got sarcoptic mange.

The Orange Shelter is a "low" kill facility. That means that vicious biters and animals who are "too far gone," from injuries disease and/or neglect are given a tranquilizer followed by a lethal injection. They do not euthanize animals for length of stay or breed condition.

"Our euthanasia rate is dropping," says Beth Meier,

"but it can't do that without volunteers coming and keeping the animals social and happy and healthy. And it can't do that without people coming in and adopting a pound puppy over a breeder puppy. It can't happen without other rescue groups, without the Humane Society. It can't happen without the community support, the county support."

It is 10 a.m. The Orange County Animal Shelter is open for business. Beth Meier is casting glances toward the parking lot hoping a car bearing a loving family will drive in. When they do, she will take them down the row of runs, and "if one strikes their fancy, we'll bring him up front and let them take it for a walk." They even have "interview rooms" where the adopting family can be alone with the animal. And, if this family already has a dog, they ask them to bring that dog to "see if it gets along." If there are kids in this family, "We show the ones from temperament testing who we think will do well with small children and steer them away from the ones that won't."

The adopting family will be asked to undergo a screening; they fill out a questionnaire. Once matched, the family receives what history is known about the animal, all medical records, and a free bag of Science Diet food. They pay \$55 for a dog, \$45 for a cat if they are Orange County residents. That is a bargain for a sterilized, healthy, fully-vaccinated and de-wormed new family member.

The screening process is "easy and relatively fast." But, it is also quite necessary because there is, regrettably, a dark side to

this...dog fighters looking for new recruits ("You can usually tell," says Beth knowingly) and people who obsessively adopt animals. They're called hoarders.

"Hoarders are people who collect many numbers of animals and don't take care of them properly," explains Beth. "We had a hoarder we busted the beginning of last year who had 20-something of one kind of dog." She pauses soberly. "It's a sickness. They get them with the intention of taking care of them and they don't realize that they are not taking care of them, and in the worst cases, you'll see dead dogs that have turned on each other and haven't been fed; don't have proper water; skin and bones; they're sick; they don't have shots." These people's names are listed in what's called a "Do Not Adopt" book. The book is shared with neighboring county Shelters; hoarders like to cruise.

The Shelter, although brand new, clean as a whistle and state-of-the-art, is full. Last year it hosted almost 1,900 dogs, up from 1,616 the year before, up from 1,100 the year before that, when it first opened. "It's skyrocketing," bemoans Beth. "This is unprecedented to have an almost completely full kennel in February. These are July numbers. Adoptions continue to go up and up, it's just that the number of animals coming in continues to rise also." Beth will have to ask for more money for next year. "I know people are not going to react well to that. There are a lot of people who think the county spent too much money already."

Last spring, the board of supervisors, appropriated to the Animal Shelter, \$307,697.64 for the current fiscal year. Projected revenues from dog tag sales, adoption fees and donations will optimistically generate \$64,000. You do the math.

Bob Cooke, an Orange County Humane Society volunteer, writes an effective fundraising letter. He's had good response from a program whereby a donation of \$1,000 or better puts a plaque with your name on it on a cage or bench. The money goes towards an emergency vet fund. It's just a drop in the bucket... but every drop helps.

Beth is supremely grateful to the Humane Society. "They are fabulous at everything," she gushes. She lists their services: running a van full of dogs up to PetsMart for adoptions every weekend, walking dogs, screening, locating and arranging housing overflow, fundraising, volunteering all day, fetching animals that were adopted out of here and then dumped at other shelters. "They do everything."

She says the same of her Shelter volunteers, adding they won't be asked as much to help clean as to "help us get the animals out of the kennels, spend time with them outside, spend time with them up front. We have to combat kennel fatigue," she continues. "Take a dog out and play

ball. Take a dog out front and sit on the couch and snuggle with it, brush it, read a book to it. Go in the cat room and let all the cats out of their cages and let them run around and play. That kind of thing helps make the dogs more adoptable and maintains their personalities better and just be better dogs and be happier."

"When you make that happen, that is a good day"

Trish Dahl carries a pillowcase in her truck. You may wonder why. "It seems sometimes that I carry more equipment than I need," says the taciturn Dahl, "but it's that one instance that you need it."

She needed it on this particular day...to catch a snake. Now, not much scares Trish. But snakes...let's just say they give her the creeps. "I'm not squeamish about anything, but I'd rather not touch one," she says with a nervous laugh, adding in clipped syllables, "I'm not particularly fond of snakes."

This could be a problem, because, you see, Trish is an Orange County Animal Control Officer. She would rather face an 80-pound snarling dog, all teeth, froth and claws than a snake

But, when a lady called her office to say there was a snake in her pantry, she had no choice but to respond. "That's our job--dealing with people," she shrugs. And so, using a snake hook, which is a metal tool that looks a little bit like a golf putter, she managed to

ease the reptile into the pillowcase. Gingerly carrying the pillowcase at arm's length, "I let it go outside. It probably went right back to her garage," she laughs.

Ask Trish Dahl about a "typical day," and she will respond there is no such thing. From picking up strays to mediating pet owner/neighbor disputes, from rounding up loose livestock, to seizing suspected vicious dogs, from trapping feral cat colonies, to investigating animal cruelty and neglect cases, from administering a lethal injection to some poor dog that's been hit by a car to putting a snake into a pillowcase, an Animal Control Officer does it all.

At the beginning of their shifts, she and fellow officer, Don Hawkins will check voice messages. What those messages say pretty much determines the rest of their day.

Here's one they hear frequently. "The dog showed up at my house. It's been here for several days. I've asked the neighbors.

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Sometimes Trish has to use the "catch pole." Hers has visible bite marks at the business end. She has been trained in how to use the tool without injuring or choking the dog. Once she has the dog's front paws up on the tailgate, she can then ease him into the cage, close the door, and withdraw the pole through a small aperture.

Photo by Phil Audibert