

Starting an Animal Shelter

The seeds for a splendid idea started with newspaper photographs of dogs in shelters. Diane Trull, a fourth-grade reading teacher at Allyn Finch Intermediate School in Dalhart, Texas, used the local paper to encourage reading. On that day in March 2003, one of her students wondered what happened to the dogs if they weren't adopted.

Diane explained that the dogs would be killed because there simply weren't enough homes. Their city shelter in their tiny Texas town was killing 600 dogs a year.

Her fourth-grade class refused to accept this "solution" to the dog overpopulation problem. "Why do the dogs have to die?" students asked. "Can't we do something about it?"

Jesse asked, "Why would it be right to kill the dogs if the only thing they want is someone to love and they don't have a home? We don't do that to homeless people, do we?" These questions spurred Diane and her class to change the fate of more than 3,500 dogs plus 500 cats.

The idea for the Dalhart Animal Wellness Group and Sanctuary (DAWGS) was launched in their classroom. However, the school did not want to endorse the program. Diane said she and her students were not "derailed. We went to the city council to propose a plan to take dogs from animal control. They were very skeptical, thinking children could not make a difference and, if they did proceed, it would be a short-term venture. They agreed to give us the dogs and puppies after three days at the shelter."

Diane continues, "Two days later, the animal control agent showed up at the school with twelve dogs. He said we could either take them or they would be euthanized. We asked him to give us until the end of the school day and we would find a place for them. Several of the students convinced their parents to let them keep them for a few days and we were off and running."



DAWGS started off in a deserted building with a side yard that a local judge donated. Diane used her credit card and an account at the local hardware store to buy what she needed to start building pens at the new sanctuary. Within a month, the new residents settled into their safe haven.

From the start, this shelter broadcast the students' belief: "All dogs are equal, and each one has a special gift to give." They decided that no animal would be killed in their shelter just because he didn't have a home. Alix explains, "Dogs don't deserve to die if there's nothing wrong with them."



Scores of kids worked hard to make a difference for each of the dogs. Boys and girls raised money by recycling newspapers. Articles about DAWGS in *Best Friends* and *People* magazine spurred many small donations that have kept the shelter operating.

DAWGS had just welcomed its first residents when it had to relocate due to a zoning law. Diane and her students got busy once again, building kennels on a small plot of city land that included several outbuildings used back in the 1930s as a slaughterhouse. Every day after school, homework, and chores, and on weekends and holidays, these dedicated students arrived at DAWGS. They made sure that the dogs received food and water, clean bedding, exercise and playtime, and loads of love.

An assortment of homeless dogs—playful puppies and seniors with gray muzzles, purebreds and mutts—are available for adoption. All are spayed and neutered, resulting in a significant drop in the number of strays.

Diane pointed out that in 2003, DAWGS was "getting in more than 100 dogs and puppies a month. Today we average about 20, unless a large group of Labs come in. Their litters can be 12 or more! So I think the spay/neuter clinics are making a difference."

Alix adds, "I can't understand why people won't just take care of their animals. It would be so simple if they spayed and neutered. Then there won't be so very many that need homes."

The lucky animals who have been adopted from DAWGS share their happy "tails" through newsletters and on the shelter's web site. Angela, a terrier mix, became a movie star. She played the part of Daisy in the movie *Dr. Doolittle 3*. Buddy, a Golden Retriever mix who was one of the first shelter dogs, saved an elderly woman. But she returned him to the shelter when



she installed a new pond in her garden that she didn't want him to swim in. A couple read about this hero pooch and decided to adopt him. Soon a private plane arrived to take him to his forever home.

The unconditional love of these dogs inspires students to volunteer. Kali explains that she volunteered with the dogs because "Well, I just love dogs. Everyone should!"

"I come here most every day," says Jesse. The boy invented a title for himself: TLC Coordinator. "I just love the dogs, and this is way more fun than other stuff."

His younger sister, Alyssa, said after an adoption of one of her favorites, "It makes me happy for the dog to finally find a great home, but it makes me so sad to see him go. These are tears of happiness. I love him so much, I know this is the best thing for him."

Many of the original fourth graders continued their involvement with DAWGS. New recruits help ensure that the safe haven continues.

Unfortunately, the shelter faced a new problem in December 2005 when city officials decided to close it down. DAWGS had six months to leave. The city said the noise of 500 dogs barking and howling was disrupting funerals in the nearby cemetery.

Fund-raising to save DAWGS kicked into high gear. Soon a new location was found, and work began on a new building. The city extended the move date. However, Mother Nature refused to cooperate. On moving day in April 2007, thunderstorms, rain, sleet, hail, snow, a blizzard, and even a tornado bombarded the region. But with kids, volunteers, and total strangers pitching in, more than 500 dogs and puppies snuggled into their new sanctuary.

Hannah, 8, observes that DAWGS resembles the little engine that could. "We just keep thinking we can, and finally we made it!" Now everyone knows that the DAWGS kids definitely can make a difference. They've beaten the odds—twice!

