Volunteer finds place in her heart for animals

By MARY SAUL
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The reception area at the adoption center is hectic and noisy – the usual – when Judy Elliott, a volunteer for Pinellas County Animal Services, hurriedly walks in on a Monday afternoon.

“This is like my second job,” Judy said. “I’m here every day after work. My heart is here.”

When her daughter married and moved to St. Petersburg, Elliott found herself as an empty nester and she tried to think about what she might do with her time. Her son-in-law was a volunteer dog walker in college, and Elliott decided to follow in his footsteps. “I just started walking dogs over here,” she said.

An Animal Services volunteer for nearly two years, her passion is evident and her face lights up as she talks about what she does at the adoption center. Her primary role is volunteer rescue coordinator – she works with the county’s partners to get more animals adopted.

When a dog or cat comes in that she thinks a pet rescue organization might be interested in helping get adopted, Elliott contacts them to see if they can make arrangements to move the pet to their care, where they may have a greater chance of finding a new home. Last year, she logged 1,500 miles on her car transferring pets to other shelters and rescue groups. She has driven them as far away as the Panhandle.

“We’ve got to get these guys in and out. It’s not good that they are sitting here,” she said. She is usually able to move the animals within a week. Her goal is to get the animals adopted out before the shelter becomes overcrowded.

Referring to Animal Services staff and volunteers she says that getting animals adopted is a priority. “They try,” she said. “They really try” to find the pets homes. It is a challenge because at the county shelter, no animal is turned away. The county government shelter puts healthy pets up for adoption and works with...
other animal rescue groups to find new homes for the unwanted pets. But it euthanizes animals that are not adoptable: if they are aggressive, too sick or too old.

“Too old” is one standard that Elliott is trying to change, as the manager of the Senior to Senior program. Senior cats and dogs are brought to meet-and-greets in senior communities in the hope that senior humans will adopt senior pets.

A part-time assistance for a three-CPA firm, Elliott lives in Largo with her husband of 31 years and has a daughter who lives with her husband in St. Petersburg. Volunteering for a pet shelter is not something that Elliott could have predicted. “I didn’t even have an animal growing up. I didn’t even know I liked animals,” she said. Then her family got a dog a few years ago.

“I didn’t know the first thing about cats and dogs,” said Elliott. “They just open a place in your heart.”

Pinellas County volunteers can expect to make a difference in the life of their community, while exploring interests, sharing knowledge, assisting others and making friends. For more information, visit www.pinellascounty.org/volunteer, email volunteers@pinellascounty.org or call 464-VIPS (8477).

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