

Animal Refuge; Seguin shelter a haven for many creatures

**by Karen Adler Express-News Staff Writer
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SEGUIN - Every dog and cat at the Southern Animal Rescue Association has a story. Most of their stories are nightmares.

Flower was found at the Alamodome with a broken hip. Someone duct taped Gunther's mouth and legs together. Julio was abandoned at a nursery out in the country. Toby's owners gave him up because he got too big.

But every one of the 365 dogs and 100 cats at SARA has a guaranteed home for as long as it takes to get adopted.

SARA is one of the largest no-kill animal sanctuaries in the southwest. Only terminally ill animals that have no chance of recovery are euthanized. No animal is ever killed for convenience, said Tracy Frank, founder and director of SARA.

"We feel like there's no such thing as an unadoptable dog," said John Helton, Frank's husband.

Frank, a former special education teacher, said she didn't really intend to start an animal shelter - it just happened. The lifelong animal lover was known for her penchant for rescuing dogs, and people began dropping off pets at the gate of her family ranch on Rawhide Road outside of Seguin.

She knew if she took some of the animals to shelters, they'd be euthanized. SARA began official operation in March 1996, and besides hundreds of cats and dogs is also home to two 800-pound hogs named Star and Goldie.

The cats and dogs live in large, communal enclosures that give them enough space to run and play with each other.

Frank and Helton live on the ranch in an old dairy barn and are on call 24 hours a day. A handful of employees and volunteers help care for the animals .

Many of the dogs arrive at SARA sick, starved and scared.

"If you show the dogs love, attention and safety, they're okay," said Helton, a writer and English teacher.

Ninety percent of the animals that come to SARA are from San Antonio, but the animal sanctuary receives no funding from Bexar County.

It costs \$10,000 a month to run the shelter and it's always a struggle to make ends meet, Frank said. They survive on a few grants and donations from SARA's 2,000 members.

H-E-B, Wal-Mart and a local feed store provide free food and cat liter, but few veterinarians will offer reduced fees, Frank said.

Frank and Helton hope to build their own clinic and hire a veterinarian, which will save SARA money in the long run. For now, Austin veterinarian Lisa Frank provides services pro bono from a card table set up under a tree.

Every animal that comes to SARA is spayed or neutered and vaccinated. Dogs are tested for heart worms and cats are tested for feline leukemia.

Potential adopters are screened to make sure they can provide a stable environment. Frank won't adopt animals to people who live in apartments or who want an "outside" pet. Cat adopters must sign an agreement that says they will not declaw their pet.

SARA is criticized for being too strict, but "we want the animal to stay," Frank said.

Last year, SARA adopted out more than 150 cats and dogs. This year only 20 animals have been adopted. SARA is now at capacity and can't accept any more animals until adoptions are made. Frank and Helton are working with an Austin philanthropist to build an adoption center in Austin.

Frank wishes there were a law requiring cats and dogs to be spayed and neutered.

Last year, San Antonio animal control euthanized 60,000 animals , she said.

For more information on SARA, visit the Web at www.sarasanctuary.org; or to send a donation, write SARA at 1050 Rawhide Road, Seguin, TX 78155.