

An Active Animal Advocate

Burban Raises the Bar at Cosgrove Shelter

PERSON OF THE WEEK

By Pam Johnson
Sound Senior Staff Writer

Much like the fact sheets crammed with animal rescue programs/education/services she spearheads, Laura Selvaggio Burban's office at Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter is packed to the margins, too.

One chair points a TV at the cage of a TV-loving, three-foot-tall macaw. Another cage is home to Squeekers the parakeet. Squeezing into some surprising spaces is a rather large cat, best buddies with Trouble, the free-ranging ferret. And, while she appears menacing, the bearded dragon in a glass case is no trouble at all, Laura says.

Like all of the shelter's guests, these five animals (rescued from one home) are here only until the best adoptive home can be found. That mission's one of Laura's highest priorities as Branford/North Branford's director of animal control.

On the job just 18 months, Laura has brought a new enthusiasm to the six year-old shelter and a creative energy to its programs, services, and fundraising. She's rapidly raising the bar on what a municipal shelter can offer and wants to inspire other shelters to do the same.

A former real estate agent, then home pet care service owner, Laura's now found the perfect fit for her marketing savvy and love of animals.

"I never would've guessed this would have been my dream job. But this isn't a typical municipal pound," says Laura.

Laura's not a police officer, but rather a municipal animal control officer reporting to the first selectman. As such, she's got flexibility to try innovative approaches to saving animals. But she also works closely with police. A remarkable example arrived in December when Branford police saved a neglected mother dog and her newborn puppies at a motel.



One of Laura Selvaggio Burban's latest causes is raising \$2,000 to return the health of Rhonda the Rottweiler, a lovable, four year-old found starving and abandoned in North Branford. Burban, director of animal control at Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter, is also seeking homes for 14 puppies rescued in Branford in December. To learn more, visit www.zip06.com, click on Branford then Person of the Week, and open the puppy photo gallery next to this story.

Photo by Pam Johnson/The Sound

"I was extremely proud of the police department. It was the middle of the night and they really spearheaded that rescue. Then, to allow me to come in, support me, and conduct an investigation... We found two more moms and six more puppies. I'm so grateful."

While finding puppies homes is a lot easier than placing vicious animals, Laura's prepared to exhaust every avenue for the tough cases, too.

"One of the hardest things to do is to rehabilitate a vicious animal," says Laura, who was once attacked by a pit bull. "It's hard to find trainers, facilities; people who'll adopt. It's easier to euthanize...than sit at a computer for five hours and find a place for that pit bull with an attitude. But it can be done and then other shelters will see they can do it, too."

The board of another municipal facility has already requested Laura mentor its officers. Laura attributes her success to the remarkable support of her shelter's board, staff, and especially First Selectman Anthony "Unk" DaRos. She also thanks the community for supporting many new fundraisers.

"We've been doing a lot of fundraisers to help our sick and injured animals," she notes. "People actually leave injured animals because they know we'll raise the money to get the surgery."

Fundraisers and donations totaled \$9,000 this past year, creating many healthy animals for adoption. A current effort's on for Rhonda the Rottweiler.

"Rhonda was another dog roaming and abandoned. She was the thinnest dog, to date, I have ever seen. She's by far the nicest Rottweiler I've met. When she got spayed, she tested positive for heartworms. She needs multiple treatments to get better; it's about \$2,000."

Laura and her team mobilized a snowflake fundraiser (matching paper snowflakes to donated dollars). Posted in the main office, it's hoped to create a blizzard of support. In addition, Stony Creek Gallery is mounting a "Help Me Rhonda" fundraiser (for more info, see story on page 20).

That kind of community support's a large part of what makes her job so rewarding, says Laura, who also always welcomes more volunteers at the shelter.

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"As much as I've given to the shelter, the shelter's given me back two-fold. I am floored every day by the goodness of people. There are days when I could feel awful about some situations, but every day I also see the good people have in them. I leave here inspired."

For a gallery of the 14 "Motel Puppies" (ready for adoption Friday, Feb. 5), visit The Sound's photo gallery at www.zip06.com, click on Branford on the map, and then Person of the Week and this story to see the puppies, adoption information, and much more about the Dan Cosgrove Animal Shelter, including how to volunteer.