

Heaven Can Wait

When a beloved pet's owner dies, what fate awaits it? Often, it's being passed over for puppies and kittens at shelters.

Kelly Moyer couldn't bear that idea—and changed her life to save these loyal animals

When Kelly Moyer prepares to take a pet away from its owner, she takes a deep breath. "Be strong," she'll tell herself. "They need you to be strong."

And so it was when she recently opened the door to the home of a middle-aged man living near her in suburban Chicago. The man was dying of cancer. He had called earlier that day to say, "It's time." When Moyer arrived, she asked him if he wanted a private moment to say good-bye to his beloved 7-year-old black Lab. He nodded, so Moyer waited behind a closed door, fighting back tears. After all, she had just been to the man's home the week before when he said good-bye to his miniature pinscher, and a week before that when he said good-bye to his Belgian sheepdog. This was the last pet, now. The last good-bye.

"Your pets will have happy homes," Moyer promised him.

It's a promise she makes over and over again—and keeps. It's the promise around which Moyer, 45, has built her life's work—Tails of Hope, an organization that takes care of pets left behind.

They are the pets we inevitably see



when we visit animal shelters. They're usually older, sometimes ailing—and they rarely get adopted. Their owners have either died or become too ill to care for them. I remember the last time I was at my local shelter looking for my stray beagle. I stopped to visit a cocker spaniel, old and nearly blind. His owner had moved to a nursing home where pets were not allowed. I considered adopting the dog. But there was another dog in the next cage with a similar story, and another one—not to mention many, many cats. Like a lot of people, I walked out, overwhelmed and depressed.

"Oh, anyone who has ever been to a shelter knows this heartache," Moyer says. "I just couldn't stand it anymore. I had to do something."

Doing something required a major

BY JEANNE MARIE LASKAS

Finding owners for orphaned pets "is the most joyful feeling I know," says Moyer

life change for a woman who had built her life and identity around climbing the corporate ladder. Moyer, who is not married and has no children, was a highly successful business executive who drove a BMW and lived on the 25th floor of a Chicago skyscraper. Friends thought she had it all. "But something is missing," she would say. "I feel such an emptiness inside." She found herself saying that a lot. So five years ago she quit her job to start her own home-based computer consulting company and began volunteering at an animal shelter. That's where everything changed.

While at the shelter, she adopted Duke, a Chihuahua-terrier **CONTINUED**

animal affairs

mix who was diabetic and blind, and whose owner had died. Next, she adopted Fee Bee, a 12-year-old dachshund who had lost her owner, and herself had only months left to live. "I wanted her to leave this earth knowing she was loved," she recalls. But she knew these two dogs represented a much larger problem, and that a much larger solution was needed.

At the shelter, Moyer heard one heartbreaking story after another, for example, a Doberman, the lone companion of a woman with a terminal illness, that was by the woman's side when she died. He refused, then, to move. Refused. Animal control officers had to be brought in to physically separate the two. Moyer heard so many sad stories like this. Stories that showed the same bond. She thought of her own father, who had died a decade earlier on his Pennsylvania farm. For him, dying really wasn't the difficult part; it was wondering what would happen to his beloved animals—a pony, a cow, a dog, and a cat named Garfield. Moyer remembered frantically visiting neighbors and interviewing them to find who might offer a suitable home. She remembered the enormous peace it gave her father when she found several homes for all his animals.

Recalling that look of peace on her father's face—that's when all the pieces fell together.

Moyer used her prodigious skills as a businesswoman and drew up plans for Tails of Hope. The group was nearly a year in the planning stages and began operating last fall. Moyer already has 35 volunteers and a network of foster homes in the Chicago area, where the animals are taken while awaiting permanent placement. Moyer and her group of tireless volunteers make sure that it happens.



"It's a sad situation we can do something about," says Moyer, at her Luv Your Pets Boutique

She carefully screens each prospective foster care worker, most of whom are people like her—volunteers at animal shelters who want to do more. She sees to it that each of the pets, many of whom are healthy and in the prime of their lives, undergo medical screenings. New owners are required to keep in regular contact with Tails of Hope, which monitors how the placements are going. They also agree to follow the instructions and wishes left by the previous owners.


Moyer's greatest wish is that others across the country will follow her lead and set up more and similar organizations. "This is a sad situation that we can actually do something about," she says optimistically. "Seeing these people comforted by the knowledge that their pets will be cared for. And then seeing these pets find new families. It's the most joyful feeling I've ever known."

Living on far less than she once did as a corporate executive, Moyer now funds Tails of Hope with fundraising efforts. She also recently opened a pet boutique where she

sells gifts for pet lovers and channels 20 percent of the profits to Tails of Hope. Featured on the store walls are photos of all the pets she has available for adoption, as well as a framed quote from the author Antoine St. Exupery: "You remain responsible forever for what you have tamed."

Moyer admits her work can be emotionally draining—especially when witnessing the good-byes. Just recently, she stood by while a woman bid farewell to her five cats. "She was going into the hospital for cancer treatments and was afraid that this time she would not come back," she recalls. "She drove three hours here herself and said good-bye to the cats in the store. I had a customer here. We were all crying."

But then Moyer promised: "I will find your cats a happy home."

And she did. She always does. 

For more information, visit www.tailsofhope.org or call 847-549-1711.

Do you know a true tale of animal love you'd like us to consider for this column? If so, send us a paragraph at lhj.animalaffairs@meredith.com.