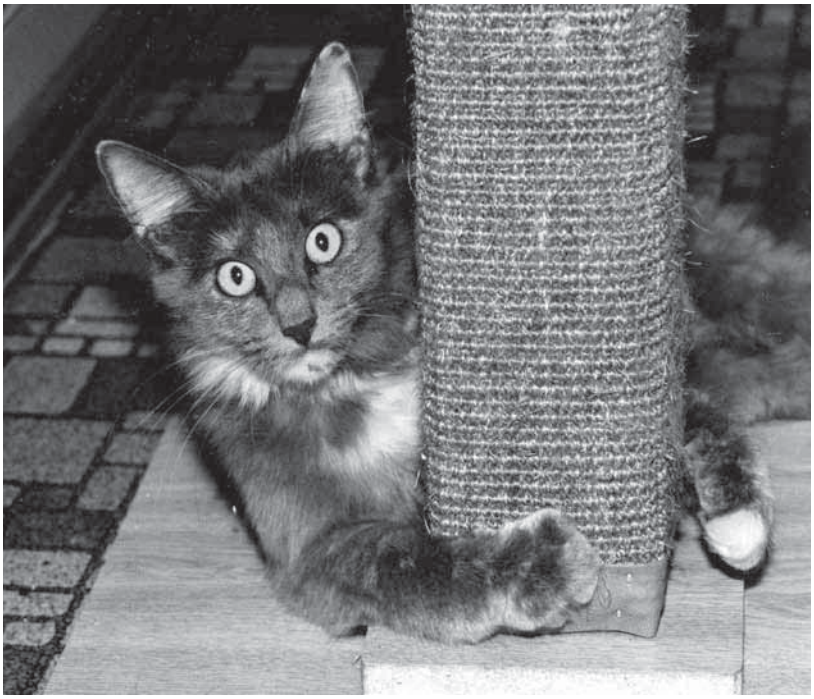

Chapter 1

BREAKING THE SILENCE: THE CHAIN OF COLLARS

> "It is important to us to show respect to the animals in this book, and homeless animals everywhere, by telling the complete and *full* truth. We feel that it dishonors the animals and what they go through, to tell only the stories with happy endings and exclude the animals whose fates are hard for us to face. As you can easily guess, this means that some of these stories will be sad, some hard to read. Some will break your heart, as they did ours. Writing these stories and reading them is a profound act of "bearing witness," but also we believe that the truth cannot be *changed* until it can be *seen*. And so we have undertaken to show it here."

From the Introduction to *One at a Time: A Week in an American Animal Shelter* by Diane Leigh and Marilee Geyer (2003; No Voice Unheard: Santa Cruz, CA, p. xii), a book that tells the stories of 75 cats and dogs admitted to an animal shelter in California during a single week.

On a fine summer day in 1992, we began stringing together the collars on a huge lawn in front of the State Capitol in Concord, New Hampshire. Staff at animal shelters throughout the state had made a paper ID collar for each cat or dog who had been put to death in their shelter during the

first seven months of the year. A description of the animal that died was written on the collar: "Oswald—3 mo. Tri-color kitten," "Black long-hair F. cat about 3 years old," "Scout LabX—loved Frisbee." We were putting them together in a single chain as part of a Memorial Service and Candlelight Vigil for Homeless Animals that would begin at dusk.

Little by little, as staff from different shelters arrived with their collars and added them to the chain, the buzz of friends working together died down. We were stunned as we began to see how long the Chain of Collars was going to be. When we were done, it stretched for almost a mile!

Later, at the vigil, shelter workers stepped forward to a microphone on the State House steps and told about some of the animals represented by the collars. Donna Brigley-Savluk, a soft-spoken Valley Girl—as women who worked at a shelter in a river valley near the seacoast were called—came forward to tell the story of a cat whom we came to call the Cat Who Loved Kittens (her picture is at the start of this chapter):

> "She was a stray, domestic long-haired blue cream tortoiseshell. who was brought to our shelter 29 days ago. She was a very pretty cat. She loved kittens. She didn't have any with her when she came in, but when she was allowed out of her cage for exercise, she would run up to the cages with kittens in them and try to clean them by licking them. If any kitten began to cry in our cat room, she would become all alarmed and I would have to go over to her and pat her and assure her that the kitten was all right.
>
> On the days that our shelter was closed, I'd let her out of the cage to stretch out on my desk and she'd try to play with my pen while I tried to do my paperwork.
>
> Two weeks ago, she became the cat who had been at our shelter the longest, so I had her photographed and made her "Pet of the Week" in our local newspaper. Unfortunately not one person called. No one cared to ask where this stray cat had come from. No one cared that she was beautiful. No one cared that she got along with dogs and cats. No one cared that she was young or that she had silky fur, or that she liked to clean kittens, or stretch out on a desk or play with a pen.
>
> So today, when other unwanted cats came through our door filling our cat room beyond capacity, I lovingly took her life."

Before the vigil, no one spoke about these individual, tragic stories very often, at least not in public. If they did, people sometimes asked them to stop, saying that they couldn't bear to hear

about it. When a story about the animals that had been euthanized at a New Hampshire shelter appeared in a local newspaper a few years before, it provoked a loud outcry. People wrote to the paper criticizing it for publishing the story. They didn't want anyone to speak about it. I think I understand why. In our heart of hearts, most of us know that the killing of so many loyal and trusting companions—that we sometimes call our "best friends"—is unspeakable.

LESSON: Ending shelter overpopulation begins with talking about it. If people can avoid facing its harsh reality, many will. Then there won't be enough public pressure to do what is needed to stop it.

Like Donna, though, we started to see that we had to speak about it. For years, we had agreed not to tell people about it. That didn't work. Nothing changed. The killing continued. It seemed like it would go on forever unless we broke the silence.

That's why we put together the Chain of Collars: to bear witness. Many of us kept a single collar in remembrance and wore it on our wrist. I still have mine. It reads "Black/Grey Tabby Cat—4 months old—#849."

Chain of Collars Display

When we made the Chain of Collars, we hadn't thought about using it for anything except the memorial service at the Candlelight Vigil. Once we saw it together, though, we discovered something we found hard to put into words: Although the scope of the tragedy was beyond understanding, it could be seen as the sum of many individual tragedies as, one by one, the lives of cats and dogs—each with a history and a future, each of whom clung to life despite its circumstances, each of whom deserved a better fate—were extinguished.

We decided that we had to show the Chain of Collars again to anyone who had the courage to look. Our request was so unusual that it took some work, but in the end, we got permission to string it on sidewalks entirely around the State Capitol. To allow legislators and visitors access to the State House, the chain was interrupted at two places on each street. We placed a table at each of these entrances and distributed information about pet overpopulation in the state and what people could do to end it.

Displaying the chain took some work, too. We wanted people to be able to look at the collars easily, so we strung the chain from full-sized STOP signs. Each sign told our mission: to "STOP the Killing."

Once we began to speak about shelter euthanasia, we soon discovered that we needed to combine the unsettling stories and photos with a message of hope: There's something each of us can do to help bring the sadness to an end. If nothing can be done to prevent a tragedy, people can resent your having told them about it. That's why we called our group Solutions to Overpopulation of Pets or STOP and why each STOP sign used to display the chain included one of four calls to action: "Spay and Neuter," "Adopt Pets from Shelters," "ID Your Pet," or "Help Pass Legislation."

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: There's no point in telling people how many cats and dogs lose their lives in shelters. Most already know.

FACT: Most people don't have any idea how many animals die in shelters every year. Six of every seven (86%) underestimate the death toll by at least half; almost three in five (59%) think the number is one-eighth or less than it actually is.

SOURCE: 2009 national survey conducted by Ipsos Marketing for PetSmart Charities titled "PetSmart Charities A & U Barriers."

As people walked along the chain, many looked shell-shocked. Some told us, "I had no idea it was this bad." Others asked, "What can I do to help?" That day, more than 2,000 people signed petitions supporting a spay/neuter bill that we were preparing to introduce into the next session of the State Legislature.

To display the STOP signs on a sidewalk, a friend and I built large wooden frames to hold up each sign. There were 40 frames, so it took the largest rental truck we could find to take them from the shop where we built them to the Capitol. I had just adopted a dog, Emma, from a local shelter the day before and she bounded into the cab of the truck with us. Looking back, I'm sure she thought, "All right! This fellow is a truck driver! It should be fun living with him!" If she was disappointed the next day, after we had returned the truck and just went together to work in an office, she didn't show it.

It turned out, though, that displaying all the Collars wasn't the most effective way to get our message across. Telling about a single animal—one collar in the chain of thousands—was even better. As Josef Stalin is supposed to have said: "One death is a tragedy; a million deaths are a statistic. "

Psychologists call this the "identifiable victim effect." They've found that stories about a single victim elicit much more sympathy than those about several victims or a large group. And telling the victim's name and showing his or her picture evokes the strongest response of all. That's the reason charities use a poster child in their fundraising campaigns instead of a set of faceless statistics.

LESSON: Stories that include a name and photo of a single victim are a much more effective way to help people grasp the reality of shelter overpopulation than cold statistics.

We used the Cat Who Loved Kittens to tell our story. We put together a 30-second public service announcement about her using photos taken when she had been Pet of the Week and ran it on local television stations. Then we made her the symbol of our legislative campaign for a statewide neutering assistance program. We had buttons made up with a black-and-white photo of her that simply read "In Her Memory" and distributed hundreds. When people asked what the buttons were about, we told her story again and again.

During the 1993 legislative session, our spay/neuter bill was sent back to the same committee of the State Legislature that had killed a similar bill the year before. Although it was hard for her to speak about it, Donna told the committee about the Cat Who Loved Kittens. She began her remarks by saying

> "At our shelter in 1992 we were forced to euthanize 1,430 cats. I personally was involved in the euthanasia of 882 of these cats. I know it is impossible for you to realize what this number means, and I wouldn't wish this realization on my worst enemy. But I am afraid if I don't make you realize the enormity of this tragedy, the killing will surely continue. I will tell you the story of one cat, so that you might begin to realize what I know only too well."

I knew we were making progress when a new member of the committee looked up at the ceiling as Donna spoke and tears rolled down his cheeks. Later, he spoke in favor of our bill in the midst of a heated debate on the floor of the House of Representatives.

We used other victims as representatives, too. In the State Senate, Senator Sheila Roberge, our spay/neuter bill's prime sponsor, told her colleagues in a floor debate:

> "Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, I talked with a Humane Society worker this morning who said that February is her favorite month because a smaller number of animals enter the Humane Societies and as a result they don't have to kill as many

animals. She said that yesterday they only had to kill Pal and Baby and Cilly and an unnamed, abandoned nine-month old dog. To her, this was a very good day. On an average day, in an average month, 35 cats and dogs are put to sleep in New Hampshire animal shelters. That adds up to more than 9,000 cats and 3,000 dogs killed every year in New Hampshire shelters alone. Most are young, healthy animals, able to provide years of companionship and love to someone. They are killed only because they have become homeless and there are no homes for them.

Senator Sheila Roberge

Humane organizations need our help. They deserve our help. Pal, Baby, Cilly and the unnamed, abandoned dog should not have died yesterday. They only died because we have not committed ourselves to act on their behalf. We have an opportunity to do this by voting to pass this important piece of humane legislation."

People react strongly to stories about shelter overpopulation. They react even more strongly to pictures and video of the victims. Compare the description in the following paragraph with the photo to the left:

LESSON: The reality is harsh, but people must face the truth, no matter how upsetting it is, in order to change it.

"Once death is final, the body is moved to a refrigerated room containing fifty-gallon barrels, which gradually fill

> with bodies as each day's euthanasia is completed. At the end of two weeks, many of the barrels are full to overflowing and a renderer arrives to empty them." *One at a Time: A Week in an American Animal Shelter* by Diane Leigh and Marilee Geyer (2003). Santa Cruz, California: No Voice Unheard, 72.

As Clay Criswell, the Executive Director of a New Hampshire animal shelter, put it in a 1994 video about pet overpopulation, *Killing Our Best Friends*:

> "What really drove the point home is some detailed documentary video that was shown of animals being euthanized and dead animals laying on a floor, which is a daily occurrence at many, many types of shelters. It wasn't pleasant and it made a lot of people sick but it stuck with them. It's the age of the cute, little, smiling caricature, cartoonish dog saying 'Gee, I wish I was spayed or neutered' that doesn't really hit home. People look at that and throw it away." (*Killing Our Best Friends* is available online at http://www.youtube.com/user/SOSVideoChannel1.)

Shortly after STOP was formed in 1991, one of the founders, Barbara Carr, hosted a program about pet overpopulation on her cable television show, *Consider the Animals*. The program included video of a technician preparing the euthanasia room while another shelter worker led a friendly dog from his cage down a corridor to the euthanasia room at Barbara's shelter.

The video then paused for a long time, to allow viewers to imagine the dog being euthanized while the camera showed a close-up of a sign on the door of the euthanasia room that read: "This room is dedicated to the memory of all the unwanted pets who, through no fault of their own, have passed through this door."

Dog Entering Euthanasia Room

A former shelter worker, Vivian Gela, helped legislators understand what shelter euthanasia is like by telling the following story to a committee of Massachusetts legislators at a 1998 hearing on a spay/neuter bill:

> "Working at the Animal Rescue League, I would get up in the morning, take care of my animal family, and then go to work to face the daily decision of how many animals to kill based on cage space, and then decide who to kill, which healthy kittens, cats, puppies and dogs were to be selected. The process was heart-wrenching, but the actual killing was even worse.

> No one will tell you this or freely talk about this, but when you walked the animals down the hall towards the euthanasia room, they all knew something was wrong. All of them sensed and smelled death. Even happy-go-lucky puppies and kittens would sense death and fight not to be killed."

After she spoke, the entire mood of the committee changed. Before, while hearing testimony from many other groups seeking specialty license plates to raise funds for their cause, many legislators made casual remarks and small talk. After Vivian spoke, they turned serious. A couple even spoke about how much their pets meant to them.

Stories and video that tell what shelter euthanasia is like can evoke strong reactions, but it's nothing compared to the reaction some people have when they are shown photos or video of an individual animal that has been euthanized. When it seemed like opponents might succeed in killing a proposed spay/neuter ordinance in the Seattle area in 1991, supporters of the ordinance distributed fliers with photos of a puppy and kitten that had been euthanized:

Legislators were inundated with more than 40,000 cards and letters about the ordinance, an extraordinary outpouring in an era before e-mail and the Internet. Comments from supporters outnumbered those from opponents by more than 30 to 1 and the ordinance was passed.

At the end of a white-knuckle legislative session in 1993—in which our spay/neuter bill won a series of cliff-hanging votes—it looked like opponents of the bill might succeed in getting it vetoed. Earlier in the campaign, we had held back from using graphic images because we worried that people would become desensitized to them through "compassion fatigue." When the bill reached the Governor, we broadcast a cable television show from the grounds of the State Capitol asking people to urge the Governor to sign the bill. We had come so far and so much was at stake that we decided

it was time to pull out all the stops. We ended the show with video of a friendly, young collie being euthanized in a shelter with the simple tag line: "Call the Citizen Hotline at (603) 271-2121 and ask the Governor to sign SB 151."

LESSON: If you tell people about shelter overpopulation and give them a chance to help, you will have many more supporters than opponents.

The response was overwhelming. Hotline operators were overwhelmed with calls, and the Governor signed the bill. I'll tell you how much difference the spay/neuter program has made later.