

# Cover



# *For* PETS' SAKE

The tireless dedication of Nevada Humane Society leader Bonney Brown connects countless locals with the ultimate gift — a loyal, treasured pet.

**I**T IS A TYPICAL WEDNESDAY IN THE OFFICE. A copy machine grinds and shimmies, shooting out neon fliers. A phone rings, slightly startling sleeping Sunny, who happens to be perched atop a desk. Nearby, Gil slinks along the floor, cleaning behind his ears with blissful enthusiasm. Dexter lounges in the hallway, rhythmically panting in cadence with the employees' swift steps as they jog to important meetings.

Yes, it's a typical Wednesday in the office — the office of the Nevada Humane Society, where the animals almost appear to allow humans the luxury of entry into their space. Gil and Sunny are feline friends, Dexter a dog, and they all seem perfectly at home in an office with doors adorned with signs warning "Beware of Escapee Cat" — she's a quick one, after all, who may just dart past as unsuspecting visitors enter.

Around this office, bowls of food and water are as commonplace as pens and pencils.

"We are blessed to be surrounded by such beautiful souls," says Bonney Brown, executive director of the Nevada Humane Society, as she gracefully guides a tour of the 60,000-square-foot facility. She talks about the groundbreaking work done within the building's walls, seemingly unaware — or simply unacknowledging — of her role. Yet, the numbers pay adequate homage to Brown's compassionate undertaking.

Brown was hired to head the Humane Society in early 2007. Shortly after coming aboard — within the first year — she had increased adoption rates by 53 percent for dogs

and 84 percent for cats, and increased the save rate for dogs and cats county wide by 50 percent.

"It's about the team," she says humbly. "I have an absolutely dedicated staff of employees and volunteers who are as passionate as I am about changing the paradigm of sheltering."

But clearly, it's about the leadership as well. In searching for its new executive director, the NHS Board of Directors hired renowned No-Kill advocate Nathan Winograd to find a leader who would make the facility a national model of lifesaving. His search landed Brown the spot of top dog — pun intended.

"I knew she not only shared a passion for saving the lives of animals and a vision of what the future could be, but that she would bring those attributes to creating the future everyone on the team wanted," he says.

The future, it turns out, would be bright for animals and animal lovers alike.

In fact, the NHS recently received a sizeable award from Maddie's Fund, a nationwide pet rescue foundation, in recognition of the remarkable 94 percent community wide save rate for dogs and cats entering Washoe County animal shelters in 2010 and 2011.

"Bonney is a complete inspiration," says Richard Avanzino, president of Maddie's Fund. "People are captivated by her energy, talent, and ability to make things happen. She truly is the best leader for the no-kill cause today."

The average national save rate hovers between 55 and 65 percent.

"I'm so proud to have the highest save rate of any

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metropolitan region in the U.S.,” Brown says, eyes gleaming behind a subtle sweep of green eye shadow. “This really is a point of community pride: Washoe County is one of the safest communities for homeless pets.”

And personal pride, too: Brown grew up in the Boston area, part of a family that treated animals with the utmost regard.

“We were a family of animal rescuers,” she recalls. “In fact, I grew up thinking everyone’s family picked up stray cats and dogs, patched them up, and nursed them back to health.”

An artist by passion, she first received a bachelor’s degree in fine arts from Boston University. But a difficult economy at the time of her graduation — the year was 1980 — left her grateful for seasonal work at retail giant Lord & Taylor.

Thus ensued a decade of retail, buying, and management work.

“I really enjoyed working in that environment,” she says. “It’s very fast-paced, and there’s no resting on your laurels — you know, you need to beat those sales numbers every day.”

Working with “the numbers” oriented her toward a future focus on the bottom line. She would soon literally

happen upon her calling, one that would meld her business savvy and passion for animals: On a drive home from her retail job one day, she found a feeble black kitten in the gutter.

“It was while I was looking for help for that kitten that I learned a pretty tragic truth that most animals — even still today — that enter animal shelters, die there. And so I started looking around for an alternative for this kitten and its siblings that I had rescued,” she says.

She found a no-kill shelter 40 minutes from her home, and she began volunteering. But realizing the need for such facilities closer to home, she and her friends started their own shelter shortly thereafter: the Neponset Valley Humane Society, which still is in existence today.

She then began a career dedicated to animal advocacy. She even traveled to the Hurricane Katrina-ravaged south in 2005.

“I oversaw the hurricane response, which included the immediate rescue of animals,” Brown recalls of her work with Alley Cat Allies, a national advocacy group. “We set up a MASH shelter just outside New Orleans. We stayed involved there for over a year helping with spay/neuter and recovery for the community, because it was just so



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devastating to all of the animal shelters and all the folks who care about animals.”

Fast forward seven years, and Brown now oversees a shelter that cares for more than 10,000 pets each year and provides pet-adoption services, low-cost spay/neuter assistance, and a free Animal Help Desk. As of this interview, she estimates 150-200 dogs and more than 350 cats are calling the NHS a temporary home. Some 300 puppies and kittens are in foster care. And more than 7,000 volunteers are on the roles.

“Those of us who work in this field are very lucky,” she says. “You know, you see a lot of sad things — animals that have been neglected or haven’t had a great life. And we’re in a position to turn all that around. We get to see them leave and go to a good new home. That’s really, really rewarding.

“You get to feel like you’re doing something that has meaning — you feel like a hero,” she continues. “And that’s how I feel about all our adopters, too. These people who come in and take on a pet that someone else didn’t notice or didn’t care for, and they open their heart and home. We get to see a lot of the good in people.”

Brown is a vegetarian (a “weird one,” she says, admitting she actually is not a fan of most vegetables), a gardener, and a reader. Her next book, appropriately: “Inside of a Dog”

by Alexandra Horowitz, a nuanced interpretation of a dog’s perspective on everyday life. She’s also a vintage costume jewelry collector, frequenting the Virginia Street Antique Mall to peruse treasures.

She says she is passionate about the local desert climate, especially the “visually striking and incredible blues” of Pyramid Lake. And another passion, of course, directly stems from her 9-to-5 role.

“I have five cats,” she says with a sigh, listing the names of Toby, Buddy, Mogli, Millie, and Sam. “They’re all from here, of course. I’d rather have fewer cats than five, but you know, you’re here, and they’re sort of all around you all the time. It’s an occupational hazard, I suppose.” ■

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*’Tis the Season...*  
to Pay Tribute to Your Pet

Looking for a way to honor your pets — current or dearly departed — this holiday season? Lights of Love is a Nevada Humane Society fundraiser that allows you to pay tribute to your furry friends. For a \$10 donation, you can commemorate an animal you wish to remember with a white light, or you can acknowledge an animal you’d like to honor with a colored light, all of which will adorn spectacular holiday trees in the community. *Call 856-2000 for details.*

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