

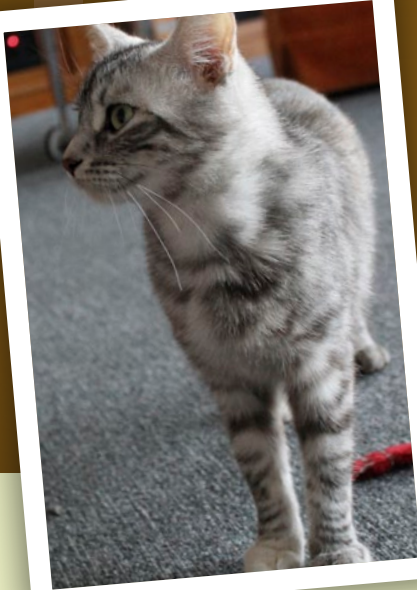
No Kills, No Cages

Oasis Animal Rescue and Education Center for an Animal-Safe Ontario

By Lewis Brooks



If you've ever adopted a pet from a typical shelter, you know what it feels like to walk into a room full of caged animals and immediately want to keep every one of them for yourself. How could you not feel for the little buggers? You have that pang of sadness when you enter the room, which smells exactly how you imagined it would - like pet food and wet fur. You look around, and every lonely old cat or adorable puppy in their little prison is staring at you. They all seem to be begging you to take them, looking up at you as though it's your job to get them out of there.



Well, there's a place in Oshawa that is about to change the way you think about animal shelters. Oasis Animal Rescue and Education Center is a place that does not believe in cages or in euthanizing its pets. Opening in January of 2011, Oasis was founded by avid animal lover Janet Smith, who has been running the center as the Executive Director ever since. It has had booming success up to date, largely thanks to the incredible hard work put forth by Smith and by those who volunteer with Oasis.

Smith is a long time pet owner, and has observed what becomes of unwanted pets first hand; "People get an adorable puppy, not realizing that when it grows up it may be a lot more work, and a lot bigger. Or they adopt kittens, forgetting that kittens grow up and must be spayed or neutered, they forget that this costs money." She emphasizes that people tend not to understand that animals need lifetime care, which can typically last for twelve to eighteen years, and sometimes even longer than that. They forget that animals require not only love, but also time and money. Because of this, Smith spent a long time seeing pets go unwanted and getting thrown onto the streets to fend for themselves, or sent to shelters that keep animals in small cages. Some of these shelters have euthanizing rates of almost half of the animals who ever check in! Desperately wanting to see policy changes for the creatures, Smith felt it important to set the precedent and come up with a better rehoming system for unwanted pets, and thus Oasis came to be.

There is a vast need for what the center has to offer, and it did not take long for Oasis to reach full flight. Despite seeing so much action, Oasis has managed well thanks to a volunteer team that does better than its best at keeping the gears turning smoothly. The shelter's hectic start can be in part attributed to its storefront location, which is extremely accessible and encourages passersby to stop in. This has promoted good business for the center and has made Oasis a well-known place.

Though the location has contributed to a successful program, being storefront has also led to many pets simply being tossed through the Oasis doorway or left outside to be found later by an Oasis volunteer.

Many pets are abandoned at Oasis in baskets and sometimes even crates that need to be pried open. Often these pets are in horrific conditions and require immediate medical attention just to stay alive. Boxes are sometimes left with entire litters of kittens with their mothers, or very sick animals that have not been cared for properly in a long time. The problem with dropping

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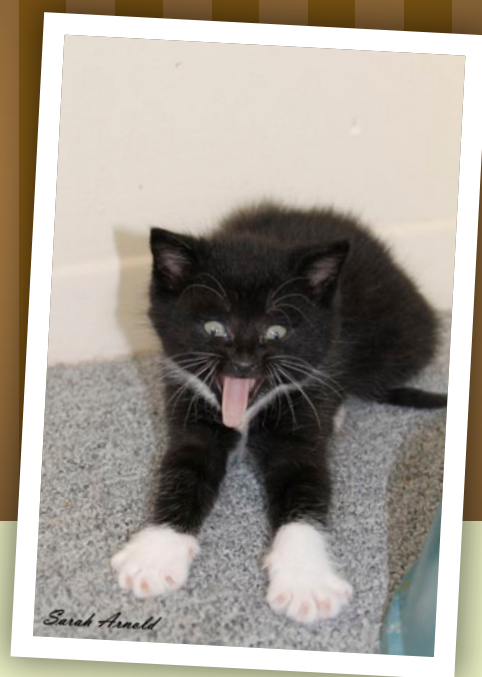
an animal at Oasis is that there is no housing for the animals on site, and in order for the animal to have somewhere to go, they would need to have a foster home readily available, which cannot happen until the animal has seen a vet. Most pets who come to Oasis are thankfully not abandoned, but are strays found in back yards or simply pets that are no longer wanted by their owners. Some owners claim to have developed allergies or have a child who has allergies, and can no longer keep the pet. Others have decided that the animal is too much work, some are downsizing and cannot keep the pets. There is a large list of reasons as to why people bring their pets to Oasis, but there are few valid excuses in Smith's eyes that lead to an owner getting rid of their pet once they have accepted responsibility for it.

Upon arriving at Oasis, all animals go straight to the

vet. An animal cannot be placed in a home until it has been given veterinary care. This includes being brought up to date on their age-appropriate shots, and animals between six and eight months old must be spayed or neutered. All males brought to Oasis are neutered before they are permitted to go into foster care. All pets re-homed through Oasis are healthy and up to date with their vaccinations. Adopting a pet that has seen a vet gives you a much better guarantee of the animals health than say, a pet store, where the animals' health cannot be guaranteed at all.

Oasis is set apart from most other shelters in that it has a no-kill policy and no animal is euthanized except when it is the only humane option (such as for a sick animal or an animal in severe pain). Because Oasis does not use cages, it cannot run out of space in the sense that another shelter might, and therefore can successfully operate a kill-free shelter. Oasis uses foster families to care for pets while they are being re-homed instead of keeping the animals in cages. "The problem with cages," says Smith, "is that eventually you run out of space. The humane society refers their clients to us when they're full." Oasis has devised a system that can house as many animals as there are people willing to help them, and so all animals that come to Oasis are held by whoever brought them in until a foster home is available, eliminating the need for a holding area and phasing out cages altogether. There are currently over 100 pets in foster care with Oasis, all of whom are in a foster home and being given proper care.

Foster parents with Oasis, just like the adoptive families, go through a screening process to ensure the safety and comfort of the pets that are re-homed. This leads to a very high success rate, as people looking to adopt or foster are checked on first-hand by Oasis, and so fewer irresponsible adopters are able to slip through the cracks. The screening process involves filling out comprehensive questionnaires, followed by a home inspection. All Oasis animals are put into homes that



have been deemed loving and pet-friendly by Oasis' high standards, ensuring a high quality of life for pets both while in foster care, and after being adopted. Animals typically stay in foster care no longer than a month before they are re-homed, though sometimes the pets' foster parents fall in love with them and adopt their furry friend for themselves! Because Oasis operates on a foster family network all over the GTA, when people open their homes to foster animals, they are directly contributing to the intake capacity of Oasis. In other words, the more foster homes the better!

When asked how someone can benefit from adopting an animal from Oasis, Smith replied, "You have the opportunity to save a life, for starters." Which is true, and it goes both ways. By adopting a pet from Oasis, you are adopting a lifelong friend, Smith advocates that the pros of being a pet-owner are extensive, for people with mental health issues, senior citizens, people who live alone, or anyone who is prepared to be codependent on an adorable ball of fur for a big chunk of time, it's worth it to adopt an animal from Oasis. Many animals come to Oasis in awful condition, and these animals are treated carefully and are eventually placed in a home where they will be loved and cared for properly. The value of a center like this one is unquestionable, and it is baffling that this is not the default rehoming process for animals when it seems to make such sense.

If you are not looking to adopt, but still want to help the animals, Oasis accepts food and money donations and is always looking for new volunteers. Oasis allows people to educate themselves about pets, especially young people. They offer nursery school visits to the center, where children can learn about the proper ways to care for animals and the importance of taking responsibility for your pet. Oasis also offers an animal food bank for owners with lower income. This service is highly-appreciated, as is made obvious by the seven-hundred people who currently use it. Smith understood that an animal food bank was incredibly necessary;

"Pets are part of the family. They deserve a food bank." Otherwise pet-owners who were facing financial difficulty would likely be forced to get rid of their animal, contributing to the rehoming problem. Oasis also offers services for senior pet owners, students needing community hours, teenagers looking to benefit from working with animals, people with mental health issues, and many others. Whatever your challenge, Oasis is here to make pet-owning possible for as many people as it can reach. "Whatever it is, Oasis will get you over your hurdle" affirms Smith, who believes that a pet is a

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positive contribution to any home that will love and give proper care to the animal.

Oasis has worked within the community to educate pet-owners and to reduce the number of unwanted pets, but Smith also points out that there are foster families all over the GTA, and the network is only growing. Three hundred pets have been adopted through Oasis to date, and the center is now looking at about twenty-five pets going through the adoption process a month. "I never realized what we are facing," Smith says of the sheer number of unwanted animals (which only continues to increase with time), but she is hopeful and determined to make Oasis' no-kill and cageless policy the general rule.

The next step for Oasis is to spread the word, and to reach out to as many people as possible. In order to do this, the center will be offering a number of new services including back yard poop 'n scooping, a service

for walking community dogs, an auxiliary service, an in-home pet sitting service, and more projects all geared to increase awareness for Oasis and provide services to the community. The shelter runs predominantly on donations, which come in the form of pet supplies and money (which is mostly used to buy more pet supplies). The more people who are aware of the center, the more people it can reach. Oasis is currently working towards opening up a gift shop in the front of the store to increase traffic. Smith believes that this will lead to more people going in and out of the center; "people will come in and see what we're all about." She hopes that people will take time to learn a little bit about the center while they stop in for souvenirs and gifts, and that having more traffic flow will increase awareness.

When asked what her ideal goal for the shelters future is, Smith stated that it went beyond just Oasis. "The main goal is to eventually create a no-kill Ontario," she explained. This means that animals would cease to be euthanized for anythings other than humane reasons like sickness and severe pain. Since most shelters are not no-kill shelters today, this seems like quite a task, but Smith believes that it is possible; "we believe that if we can put together the template, and do it properly, then that is achievable." Part of the template includes working closely with other shelters throughout Ontario to spread the word. "We will fight together" she concludes, in answer to the need to create an animal-safe Ontario.

For more information on how you can help please contact Oasis Animal Rescue and Education Center at: 905-728-8500, 86 Simcoe Street North, Oshawa, Ontario, L1G 4S2

Lewis Brooks is new to the GTA, having grown up in a small town in New Brunswick. He spent a lot of time writing stories and poems for local contests and newspapers. He hopes to make a name for himself as a writer to eventually publish fiction.

Photography by Sarah Arnold