

Community Service Project

As Required Prior to Attending NCSSM

By Dahl Clark

June 17-July 2

(60 hours)

For most, community service has two general meanings. Either it is a required obligation slowly met, or it is a measure of the closeness a person feels to his or her community. One of the greatest ironies in America today is the general egocentrism and perfunctory attitude that pervades society. Despite the great and often extraordinary sacrifices our parents, friends, teachers, and others in the community make in the name of our success, too few thank-yous are given out in return. Whether I am sixteen or sixty-five, I feel that it is time to return the commitment, assistance, and time my home community has given to help me become the person that I am now. For me, community service is no obligation. I want to give something valuable back to the people. I believe that community service is a satisfying, enjoyable first step toward building an interdependent relationship with all kinds of people, the type of mutual relationship that will be needed throughout my life.

Of all the places I could have chosen to contribute my service to, I chose the Cumberland County Animal Haven. One important factor influenced my decision. I wanted to both gain from the experience, and, know that the community *as a whole* has benefited because of something I helped to do. We understand that a community is a *unified body* of individuals. Though man is the dominant species of land animal, it is not the only species that comprises the community's "unified body." There are many other forms of life, particularly cats and dogs, that closely interact with people daily. The project I decided to undertake enabled me to contribute to my community in its entirety. If I had to spend another sixteen days with the project, I would do it all over again--my experience was both enlightening and challenging, allowing me to collaborate and cooperate with other volunteers working at the same job.

The Cumberland County Animal Haven is one of three places in my county where people may bring their pets to be "free" of the responsibility of taking care of them. The other places are the Pound and the SPCA, on one hand. At the Pound, animals are euthanized after residing there for more than ten days. The sanitation of the SPCA is rumored to be poor. On the other hand, owners who greatly care for their animals take them to Animal Haven--a soothingly-named, no-kill animal shelter for cats and dogs, run by people who care deeply for the welfare of their pets. Owners know instinctively that their dogs and cats have found a wonderful, nourishing home where they will be well treated as part of a larger family.

Initially, I felt a simplicity about the place, an environment where the primary focus was not the welfare of humans, but animals. This was another reason I chose to serve my time at Animal Haven. The community as a whole being made of both people and animals, I reasoned that if I could contribute something wonderful to both, my community service experience would be more complete. In dealing with community affairs such as government, money, security, and housing maintenance, often our closest companions are left ignored. Pets are left neglected, malnourished--or simply, their owners do not have enough time to spend with them.

Upon my first visit to the Haven, I was impressed by how close and knowledgeable the staff was with all the animals. Although the Haven was a quaint little building with thirty-five kennels and three surrounding play yards for dogs and puppies, I experienced a shared sense of togetherness with both the animals and the people whom I worked with. The volunteer staff consisted of about six people from highly diverse walks of life, yet this small, unique population promoted a complex feeling of congeniality and purpose.

Mutualism was strongly encouraged between the volunteers of Animal Haven. My responsibilities consisted of letting the dogs run outside early in the morning, then washing out their kennels, giving them fresh water, and serving new food. Whenever there was something needing to be done, someone was helping to do it. Another volunteer and I often would share our responsibilities together, she holding the dustpan while I swept, or I holding the mop bucket while she scrubbed the floor. There was laundry and sheet-folding to do, dish-washing, cleaning the cat and kitten cages, refilling the outdoor water buckets for the dogs and puppies, and occasionally, answering phone calls from prospective owners. These responsibilities were shared mutually between all who volunteered at the Haven.

I understand why this cooperation was, and still is, so important to the Haven. The primary responsibility of Animal Haven is to find its residential guests new owners and a loving home. In the meantime, it must provide a safe, clean place for cats and dogs. The foremost focus of the agency is not who is supposed to wash out the kennels, or whether the towels are folded in halves or thirds; the focus is to make sure that responsibilities necessary for the welfare of the animals are completed. The attention is not paid to individual

human affairs--volunteers work at Animal Haven to help the animals in my community that unnecessarily must live without nourishing food or homes.

While I worked at Animal Haven, I found that my introduction to handling animals included such issues as the needs and illnesses, safety, and the importance of respecting the lives of animals. Although my future plans of profession do not include a basis in veterinary medicine, I understand that all fields of study are inherently interdisciplinary. The knowledge and experience I have received by working with different breeds of felines and canines, old and young, and common illnesses experienced in both species can be applied in some way to science, mathematics, and other possible fields of study. Prior to my initial arrival at the Haven, several cats had acquired an upper respiratory infection and had to be quarantined. While instructed about the necessities of keeping the isolation room sanitary and routinely disinfected, I was quite surprised that many cat and dog illnesses are similar to those of humans. The cats' colds were treated with a similar type of amoxicillin as used in humans; I also learned that feeding veterinarian-recommended dog food to healthy dogs can accidentally make dogs sick, as undesirable effects can be produced when healthy people take unrequired medications.

The needs of animals, and subsequent behaviors when needs are met, are not much different from those of humans. They possess the same types of feelings as we do--both physical and emotional ones. When stroking them, we know how to make cats happy, and they know how to make us happy by snuggling close to us and purring. I have found truth in the statement that spending time with animals greatly helps to relax and ease the tension of people; animals require nothing more than the basic needs for existence, and love.

However, because animals react much the same way humans do, unpredictable behavior can be expected from animals whose needs remain unfulfilled. Gained from my community service experience was a greater understanding of animals' capabilities and how to work safely around them. Though all the animals have received rabies and other vaccines, care is taken with sanitation and handling the animals, especially if the animal is a kitten fond of climbing people by its claws.

Respecting the lives of animals is key to everything the Haven does. I understand greatly the value of having animals around, saving, and protecting them; if shelters like the Haven and caring owners did not exist, the public would be in great distress. Today's domesticated dogs and cats rely on humans for their entire livelihood. These animals have become inseparably intertwined with us because they have been bred for specific, tame characteristics by us. Unlike wolves and ferile cats, most domesticated animals can no longer survive alone in the wild. Mankind alone is responsible for the welfare of its pets, and the volunteers of Animal Haven are dedicated to help the community save and protect its animals.

A most important side of my community service experience, besides working with the animals, was the chance to practice creativity. One of my favorite duties was organizing the storage room, which involved stacking pet food and supplies on the shelves. This room was usually left in disarray, but I found it would be more efficient to locate different materials if everything was placed in a certain permanent location. My supervisor was especially pleased. When the door lock to the storage room had broken and remained broken for several days, I found it useful to be creative. When my other responsibilities were finished, I undertook the task of repairing the door lock so people could enter the storage room more easily.

Toward the completion of my assignment, the personal and emotional impact that I experienced at Animal Haven could clearly be seen all around me: How excited the dogs and cats were while being prepared to receive new homes! I was surprised at how many people came to Animal Haven searching for the perfect pet. Prospective owners came to the shelter searching for some special, appealing uniqueness they hoped to find amongst the Haven's animals, but there was one characteristic they all had in common. Each person desired to have a close companion. Again and again, I saw the brightened faces of children when they told their parents they have found their first puppy, the silent radiance of the elderly when their new cats and dogs curl up beside them. Reciprocally, I heard the nestled purring and tail-wagging of pets awaiting departure with their new owners; I know these animals are happy now, though they had never uttered a word.

The extent of my personal satisfaction I feel as a result of my service to Animal Haven is indescribable. Apart from helping the animals feel comfortable and loved, I experienced an overall sense of personal and

emotional well-being from knowing that I have done something valuable. Everything that I expected to gain, and many wonderful experiences I had not expected to gain, I found at Animal Haven. Because of this, I do not think I would want to change any of my experiences. However, for the better condition of the animals there, I might wish the facility to be expanded so that each dog and cat would have more indoor space. There are so many animals that need shelter, and many have to be turned away from a good home--simply because there is not enough room to house any more animals.

While volunteering at Animal Haven, I learned the rigorous enjoyment of work, the importance of helping a non-profit agency like Animal Haven to continue its work in the community, the varied lifestyles of my fellow volunteers, and that anyone can make an impact in another's life. Many times, I worked with the founder of the Haven, who was a woman in her late seventies. Together we fed and brushed the dogs, placed boxes together onto shelves, washed the kennels, and scrubbed the patios and play yards. These experiences cannot be exchanged for anything else; if I was offered the opportunity to participate in another community service program, I would consider Animal Haven as my first choice. However, I would as readily choose another project if I had to begin again, for the purpose of gaining new experiences and hopefully, contributing more to the community than I had before.

At the Cumberland County Animal Haven, animals arrive and leave. This is what ultimately happens. However, during their undefined transit time, I had a responsibility to return the time, help, and devotion my home community has given me by helping to provide the best possible home for its animals. By doing so, I have experienced great satisfaction and personal enlightenment. I feel a greater appreciation for life, a greater self-awareness from realizing my contributions to my community, and a desire to help my community further.

In watching the animals live at Animal Haven, I see a reflection of myself. This experience must be universal. To witness an entire range of conscious emotion, from the fear dogs experience when their owners abandon them to the ecstatic tail-wagging and bouncy prancing they project before their new owners, has made me more aware of the relationship between man and animal. Did I like what I did, did I feel worth

in my responsibilities? Yes. After my contribution of work when I see the dogs happily eating and playing, the cats and kittens purring in the arms of new owners, I feel that I have done something wonderful. When I think of the countless stray animals on the streets without food, or the dogs and cats who are put to death each day at the Pound, I know that there are thirty-five cats and dogs whom I have helped to save. When I see them happy as a result of my community service contribution, I feel a great satisfaction--no matter how small my contribution may have been. I feel wonderful knowing I have helped to make these animals' lives more wholesome, that I have helped to change the lives of others, whether they are man or man's best friends.