

SACRAMENTO - Utilizing a combination of dedication, innovation, and a never-say-never approach, the Sacramento City Animal Shelter on Front St. has set out on a campaign to save the lives of thousands of animals.

"We like to call it the 'Let Live Campaign'," says acting shelter manager Gina Knepp. "We don't like to use the term 'No Kill' because there's such a misconception out there of what No Kill really means."

Generally defined, a No Kill shelter does not refer to a location that never euthanizes an animal, but rather one that euthanizes if an animal is too sick or too aggressive to be adopted, and never as a means of population control.

"Euthanization means merciful killing," explain Knepp. "I understand putting down an animal that's so sick they can't get up to eat. What I'm not okay with is putting an animal down because nobody has adopted it yet."

Knepp began her stint at the shelter as an assistant, but was launched into the role of manager in July 2011 when former manager Penny Cistaro resigned.

"It was supposed to be a temporary thing, but I found my passion," explains Knepp. And her passion has translated into impressive results.

Within her first seven months on the job, Knepp has taken the shelter's "leave live" rate from 25% to 30%, and boosted it to 52% as of March.

"My goal is 75% by August and I'd eventually like to achieve a 90% leave-live rate," says Knepp.

Knepp says getting the shelter into the public eye and boosting their volunteer numbers are key to achieving her lofty goals. "The media is a huge piece of the puzzle. Since July, we've been in the press at least once every week, except for Thanksgiving."

In addition to television stories and commercials, the shelter also has volunteer writers who promote their efforts in blogs and newspapers.

"Volunteers are the cornerstone of any successful shelter," pinpoints Knepp, who has been on a mission to bolster the shelter's volunteer numbers.

The Sacramento City Shelter currently has 120 volunteers who donate 1000 total hours per month. But Knepp says she is shooting for more. "I want to double that number by this time next year. That will allow our specialists to focus more on working with the pets to make them more adoptable."

Groups like Chako Pit Bull Rescue are the kinds of specialists to whom Knepp is referring. Volunteers from organizations such as Chako work with pets at the shelter in need of special socializing training to make them more suitable for placement in the home of an everyday pet owner.

But the shelter's volunteer force extends well beyond those working directly with the animals. "There's a job here for everyone," Knepp says. "We've got volunteers who never step foot inside the facility. "

From filing and data entry to creating promotional collateral and mailing out vouchers for low-cost spaying and neutering, this small army of dedicated helpers is a major factor in the shelter's ability to successfully promote adoptions and reunite lost pets with their owners.

Equally important have been Knepp's promotional endeavors that some in the industry might consider somewhat unconventional. "Look for the obvious and do the opposite," has been the secret to the shelter's success, according to Knepp.

"I went and listened to Nathan Winograd at University of the Pacific and had an epiphany," Knepp reveals.

Winograd, a renowned author and figure head in the movement to eliminate inhumane treatment of animals at shelters, tours the country promoting methods to bolster adoption rates.

Knepp says, "I thought to myself afterwards, this is what I need to be doing. - getting out in the community."

Ever since, the first-year manager has made a concerted effort to put the shelter in front of the public, participating in events like Sacramento's Halloween and St. Patrick's Day Parade, hosting off-site spay and neuter drives, and even placing shelter cats into competitive shows.

"A woman back in October said she needed cats for a cat show, so we took a number of cats and competed," explains Knepp. "We had 19 cats adopted at the show and have participated in two more since." To date, 50 cats have been adopted at cat shows and shelter cats have actually tallied 81 awards in the "house cat" division.

Gina Knepp and the Sacramento City Animal Shelter have demonstrated that dedication, innovation and passion can overcome budgetary and staffing obstacles lain before city shelters nationwide.

"To me it's not about dollars and cents. It's about whether you want to do it or you don't."

The hundreds of pets already saved by the Sacramento City Animal Shelter are living proof that Gina Knepp and her selfless workforce "want to do it".