

L.A.'s Minister of Pets

Los Angeles' new director of animal services envisions a real City of the Angels

Animal lovers who are trying to bring an end to the endless slaughter of homeless pets in pounds and shelters across the country generally agree that "If it can be done in Los Angeles, it can be done *anywhere!*"

The huge, sprawling, multi-ethnic metropolis is an animal welfare officer's nightmare. Packs of homeless dogs roam the streets of disadvantaged neighborhoods. Immigrant families often come from countries where dogs and cats are treated as food. And people arriving in or leaving the city, in search of a better life or a better job, don't think twice about "dropping off" the pet they once thought they cared about.

New York magazine recently published a deeply troubling cover story describing the plight of homeless animals in the "care" of city animal control. With just the names changed the same article could have been written about Los Angeles.

Now, enter Dan Knapp.

A former Assemblies of God minister, business consultant, and director of the Sonoma County Humane Society, Dan was a bold choice by Los Angeles mayor Richard Riordan as the new head of the strife-ridden Animal Services Department. No less bold was Dan's decision to take it. The *L.A. Times* described him as Daniel stepping into the Lions' Den.

Dan Knapp is a visionary with a mission: No More Homeless Pets in Los Angeles. His approach includes a complete redefinition of how people view their pets based on a deep understanding of how animals and people can bring healing and wholeness to each other.



Best Friends: You've marched into one of the most difficult animal situations anywhere. Why do you want this job?

Dan Knapp: It keeps coming down to only one answer: the animals. It needs to be done. Los Angeles and New York, the two larger cities in the nation, have such phenomenal euthanasia rates and such horrible animal control programs that it is not acceptable; it's immoral. There's an opportunity to do something here. I had accomplished a lot of good things in Sonoma County and I felt that it might be time to grow a little bit as an individual and so the two came together.

Working Toward a No-Kill City

BF: How do you begin working toward a no-kill city?

D: On January 1, 1999, we're beginning our first no-kill facility in our East Valley shelter where we will be adopting 100% of the animals.

They have many more animals coming in there, and a higher euthanasia rate, so it's much more challenging. But I want to start with one of the most difficult shelters so that we can model these programs and then plug them into the other areas.

BF: How is the staff reacting to this visionary person who arrives and announces, "Okay, folks, we're going no-kill."

D: I've talked with almost all of the volunteers and employees and they're ecstatic. (Of course, those who might be questioning it, who might be wondering if the new boss is crazy, aren't going to say so to me!)

If there's any hesitation, it's because they know that whatever they've asked for in the past has not been given.

Bringing the Humane Community Together

BF: And how are all the private animal rescue groups reacting? There's been a lot of friction between them and city animal services - in the past.

D: There has been a lot of animosity aimed at animal control. It's been perceived as cold, uncaring, unable, or unwilling to change the problems.

My own background is with the humane community, and I don't think there should be a line between "them" and "us". We all have the same goals, so we sit down and talk about our interests rather than our differences. We can develop programs where we can work on each other's interests. That's beginning to happen right now. There's a high level of expectation and a high level of impatience.

The humane community is excited about helping turn the East Valley shelter into a no-kill. But beyond that, a good portion of them are standing back and I wish they wouldn't do that, because it hurts in the long run. They're waiting to see what happens before they put any resources into it. Well, how's it going to happen if you don't help first?

There are some humane groups that have the attitude that this is a big commitment to an awfully big job. They don't want to be disappointed. They say, "before we help you, before we give you volunteers, funding, before we do any type of support, we're going to sit back and we're just going to watch and see if you do what you say you're going to do."

BF: There's also been a lot of animosity between the various animal groups themselves in L.A.

D: There's been a lot of disunity – a lot of frustration. But this is one of the first times that the humane community has really been unified in the city of Los Angeles. It's unified right now.

The humane community here is like a gentleman who's been starving for many, many years and is anxious to eat immediately. I've been here four months and they're already very anxious for tremendous results.

It's a process of education, slowing them down, and working together to do the job. That's the challenge. We have 59,000 animals a year being put to death in the city of Los Angeles. So the humane community is keeping the city council and the mayor's office very sensitive and that's kind of exciting.

The Story of the Stone Soup

BF: I've heard that the city is asking you to raise most of your own funds for the new programs.

D: I think that any city would like their General Manager of Animal Services to raise his or her own funds!

But I think the city understands that it's a partnership, that it's not all going to be done by their monies and it's not all going to be done by private monies. It's got to be an alliance. They're looking for partnerships. It's a significant step for the city to say, "We can't do it on our own, and we need your help."

From my point of view, it's like the story of the stone soup:

A man comes to a village and asks for food. The people say they can't give him any food. So he says, "I can make a delicious stew, one of the best you've ever tasted. Just bring me a pot of boiling water."

So they bring him the pot of water and he drops a stone into it, saying that this is the secret. Then he tastes the "soup" and says, "It's good, but it would be a lot better with cabbage."

Eventually, he gets each person who originally said no to donate something to the soup: vegetables, potatoes, whatever. By

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the time they get done, everybody has participated, everybody is excited about this stew and everybody wants to taste it. Of course it's the best stew they ever had.

I'm just the stone in the pot here in Los Angeles, and my job is to invite everybody to participate and to lay down their fears. It's time to do that and I think it will happen.

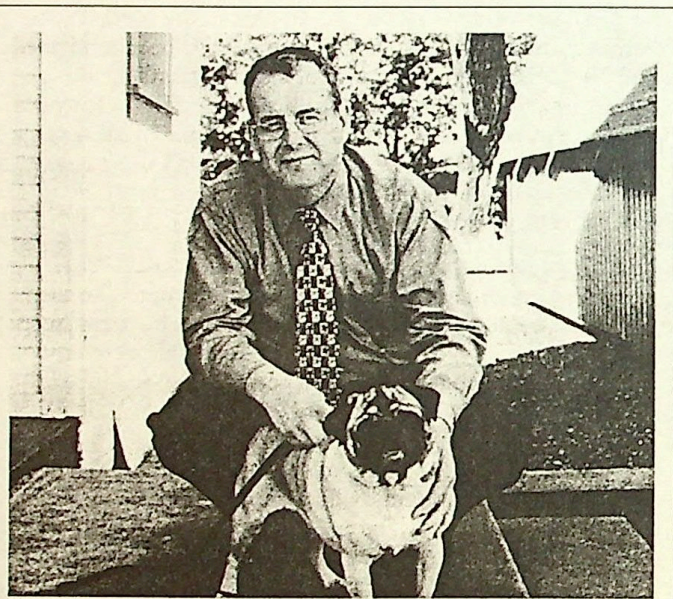
Preacher, Pastor, & Visionary

BF: That sounds very much like what a minister might tell his parish. You were a minister. How do you come from that background to this work?

D: Some years ago when I had a church, some very close friends came to me and they said, "We really feel strongly that God has placed something on our hearts which we need to tell you. We don't think that you're probably going to be ministering in a church in the near future. We just have on our hearts that you're going to be pastoring animals."

I had totally forgotten about that. Then, maybe when I was five or six years into this work, I flew back to visit them and they said, "Oh, do you remember what we said? Well, look what you're doing!" So I think there's some divine guidance here.

I believe God has certainly sent me off in this direction, hopefully to help His creation, as well as to change me further, make me a better person.



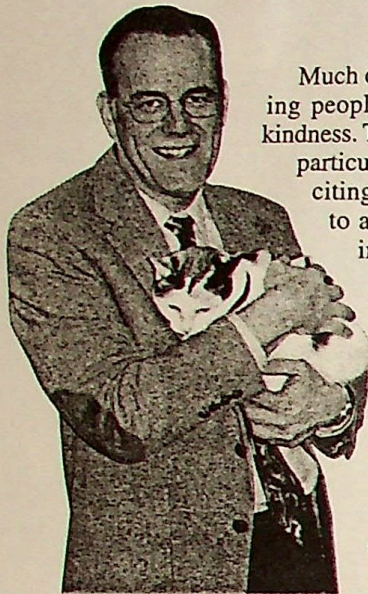
How Pugsley Hit Home

I adopted Pugsley from a local shelter about eight years ago. One day, my wife and I took him into the city and I was waiting outside a store for my wife with Pugsley.

An Oriental man walked by, and he took one look at Pugsley and started speaking to him in Chinese. He bent down and held a whole conversation with Pugsley, who was conversing back to him the way that Pugsley does. This conversation went on for about five minutes while I just stood and watched.

Suddenly, the Chinese gentleman stood up and in very broken English said, "Chinese Pug! Chinese Pug! My home! I just went home!" Then he walked away, happy.

For that few moments, he had an opportunity to go home, where there was no language barrier whatsoever as he and my Chinese Pug visited. This really is a universal connection that can be had through animals."



Much of my training is in counseling, helping people learn empathy, compassion, and kindness. Those are really powerful skills in this particular field because one of the most exciting things is being able to bring healing to an animal. But that also brings healing to the human-animal relationship.

I've seen a phenomenal amount of change and healing occur through relationships between people and animals.

Animals & Spirituality

BF: So you believe animals play a part in human spirituality?

D: Absolutely. Animals are an integral part of our lives. Through our relationship with them, they can bring healing to our own lives, whether it's emotional healing or physical.

I've seen people whose physical healing has been greatly enhanced by a relationship with an animal. I've seen people who've had longer lives, who have not died, who have been motivated to come out of the hospital because of a companion animal.

I've seen children who've been abused sexually and physically be healed by the love of a companion animal and had that cycle of abuse broken in their lives.

In fact, I plan to introduce a campaign called *Healing L.A. Through the Animals*.

BF: What's at the core of the program? Adoptions? Pet therapy?

D: We are going to run it as an actual campaign. The theme is responsible human-animal relationships. I hate the term "responsible pet ownership." The number one reason for pet overpopulation is that people do not bond with pets, the pets are not children to them. We know that spay/neuter is the answer, but the *problem* is the lack of bonding.

So this will be a campaign about the benefits of the human-animal relationship, starting with a series of different programs. The adoption program will be an element of it. So will pet therapy.

I want to start a program here like we did up north, where we brought healing to abused children and children at risk through plant and animal therapy. In San Francisco, police officers took dogs into some of our troubled neighborhoods. They just spent time visiting with the kids in those neighborhoods, talking to them about responsible human-animal relationships.

We want to encourage people to spend more time – quality time – with their animals, and to adopt an animal.

Building a National Program

BF: You're only just beginning your work in L.A., but you obviously have a national vision, too. You've talked about wanting to join forces with New York's animal services.

D: We're hoping to set up a collaboration, a sharing of information. As we start to apply programs here that work, we can maybe give those programs away to them.

I'd like to start some dialog going back and forth: commiserate, share a little of our wounds together, and encourage each other to implement creative programs.

For example, we have a phenomenal problem with dogs that

are dumped on city streets and form into packs. They're being called the new street gangs of L.A. So, we might say to New York, "Do you have this problem? If so, what have you done? Let's compare statistics." We would talk about what we are doing and see if that could help them and vice versa.

You could call it a therapy group, getting together other large agencies that are struggling as well, and seeing if we can put together resources or ideas to leverage some results. There's a chance to build friendship and encouragement.

BF: People often tell us that they found an animal on the street, took it to a shelter and said they wanted to come back in a couple of days to claim it once they had a temporary home set up. But when they went back, the animal had been destroyed.

It happens in L.A. and it happens all over the country.

D: The number one problem that shelters have here in L.A. is that we're understaffed. We have the same staffing levels, if not less, than cities much smaller than our size.

The euthanasia rate of 59,000 animals a year is, in part, because the employees just can't handle the animals. It's basically people resources. You can't even take people and train them if you can't afford to have someone else cover their job while you're training them. So our staff has severely inadequate training. And they've been overworked for so long that they have morale problems and apathy problems. And those who are still impassioned are frustrated. So mistakes are made and the public doesn't receive the service that they need.

We need to start showing our employees that there are successes and that they're not all failures. When they're no longer on the defensive, they can actually glow about their accomplishments but also talk about their challenges.

BF: A lot of people who rescue animals and try to find homes for them or who work in shelters find themselves burning out sooner or later.

D: We all need to learn how to take care of our *own* animal: that's *us!* We take care of all the other animals, and the people around us who are grieving, and then we are the first animals that we abandon.

I'd love to do seminars on replenishing yourself. This work is very spiritual because you are in touch with a passion that is life. You are a life-giver, you are a life-bringer. And when you are working so hard to make sure that life is released, and not death, that takes the life out of you.

We do a lot of one-on-one work on debriefing, defusing situations, and how to replenish and refresh. I'd love to do that on a larger scale. It would be wonderful to have a little retreat somewhere that's a part of a sanctuary where animal welfare workers could just come and have a rejuvenating weekend.

Bottom Line

BF: What's the time line for turning L.A. into a no-kill system?

D: That is the largest question that you can ask. We know it's going to happen, and that it will happen when everyone helps. That's pretty ethereal! If you want to give it a deadline, I would say five to seven years. 🐾

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