PREFACE

Some would describe me as a typical 17-year-old girl, because I swoon over adorable things and have always been keen on happily-ending fairy tales. When the commercials with the sad, abused animals come onto the television, I melt like butter in a frying pan. My family has always had at least one furry friend roaming our house, and I would consider myself a sincere animal lover. I’ve always felt sympathy for animals without a home or owner, which is why I have chosen to write my ethnography on the Crossroads Animal Shelter in Buffalo, Minnesota.

My family has never adopted a pet from an animal shelter, because we’ve heard so many horror stories of families taking home ill-tempered pets. We have always assumed it safest to take in an animal who hasn’t grown cold from abuse, doesn’t have possible diseases, and will not suffer from any emotional baggage. I’ve never stepped foot into a building filled with homeless animals, and I’m rather nervous. It breaks my heart to imagine my own pets being homeless. Just like humans, animals have no control over the situation into which they are born, and the animals who find loving homes are the most fortunate.
After contacting the facility, I was invited to observe during any of their visiting hours. I expect the shelter to have a gloomy atmosphere with an abundance of sad looking animals; however, I imagine there are many joyous adoptions that lighten the emotional drainage. I assume the employees who interact with the animals everyday will be somewhat protective of them–especially of the critters who have stayed there for a large chunk of time. I expect the caretakers and volunteers will be overly kind and collaborate well together. I am anxious to meet all of these people, along with the animals, and figure out what motivates them to surround themselves in such a heart wrenching environment everyday.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Animal control has always been an issue, and it has only worsened through the years. Dating back to colonial times, pounds and shelters were used to contain any companion animals found around the town (“Animal”). Pounds are community facilities that contain animals found on the streets, but they are not capable of holding them in their care for very long. Often times, a pound will send the animal to a local shelter or have it euthanized–put to death by an injection–if an owner does not claim the runaway within a week. An animal shelter, on the other hand, usually will keep the animal until they are adopted.

Each year, around 7.6 million companion animals are put into shelters around the United States. Of those 7.6 million, approximately 2.7 million will be euthanized (“Shelter”). 35% of shelter animals will lose their lives, because there simply is not enough room to contain every stray. Each day 10,000 humans and 70,000 puppies and kittens are born in the United States (Crossroads). These high numbers are a result of animals not being spayed or neutered. If these
rapid birth rates continue, there will never be a home for every animal. Since this problem exists, millions of healthy and loving strays are put to death as a solution to animal control.

According to their website, Crossroads’ mission is “To provide a comprehensive and compassionate service to the people of the Wright County area through protection, care, shelter, placement, and education for the dignity and well-being of all animals.” Crossroads was opened in 2001 by a small group of dedicated volunteers who wanted to help homeless and abandoned animals. Today, they are a non-profit charity-based organization that has a placement rate of 94%. The shelter helps over 500 animals every year, and they very rarely euthanize the animals. Crossroads is open to the public every Friday through Sunday, but the rest of the week is reserved for the employees to clean and foster the animals (Crossroads).

Crossroads Animal Shelter is dependent on its six staff members and multiple volunteers. Approximately 12 volunteers come in ritually, and dozens of others attend a few times a year. After taking an hour-long volunteering class, anyone is allowed to come into the shelter and socialize with the animals. These volunteers help the animals gain confidence in themselves, which makes them better pets when an adoption comes around. Crossroads accepts both stray animals and surrendered pets, and they will care for the animal until it gets adopted. The majority of the animals are strays, which means someone found it living on the streets. However, there are a few surrendered pets in the shelter. This means the animal’s previous owner was not able to–or didn’t want to–care for it any longer (Snavely).
OBSERVATIONAL DATA AND ANALYSIS

28 February 2016 (12:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.); 4 March 2016 (3:00 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.)

As my tires crunched to a stop on the gravel parking lot of Crossroads Animal Shelter, my insides squirmed with anxiety. Meeting new people has never been my forte, and I was dreading the awkward silences that awaited me inside of the blue and white building. A fluorescent pink paper plastered on the door caught me off guard. It read, “CAUTION: CATS AT PLAY.” Not entirely sure if the sign was sarcastic or not, I cautiously stepped inside of the shelter. A smiling girl, who appeared to be of college age, approached me. Her name was Alyssa, and she had been working at the shelter for three years. Alyssa had chestnut colored hair that hung just below her shoulder blades, eyes as blue as Caribbean waters, and a smile that brightened the room. She had grown up in Buffalo, went to college to become a vet, and then became side-tracked by her job at the shelter. Alyssa is currently planning to transfer into a vet clinic, but her attachment to the shelter is making it difficult to move on. I instantly felt a connection to her peppy personality as she gave me a tour.

The facility was small, and I was amazed that so many animals could be cared for in such limited space. The main room was connected to two smaller play rooms and two closed doors--designated for staff only. The walls were concealed with posters of information about being a good pet owner, inspirational messages, and flyers for lost animals. An enormous donation jar filled with tarnished coins and cash sat near the door--making the urgency for
donations obvious. These artifacts reveal how deeply the staff members care for the animals and their futures. Soft meows filled the air, and I realized there were only cats in the shelter. 25 cages were spread around the room, and one human-sized cage sat in the corner. I assumed this artifact was used when volunteers and visitors wanted to play with the cats. Each cage had a white tag filled with information about the cat—name, age, and background. Green stickers on the cat’s information tag indicated the critter does not get along with other animals. I noticed most green-stickered cats had been in the shelter for a long period of time.

A giant cat tower, centered between all of the cages, stood around six feet tall, and had many different platforms. I was taken aback when I saw it was engraved with the name of Jacob Jones, a boy from my class who tragically passed away in May of 2014.

“When Jacob passed away, his family donated a lot of money to the shelter. We used the money to buy the tower, and now we have something to always remind people of his special personality,” Alyssa said with a bittersweet smile. This artifact was a tribute to Jacob Jones, and I found it touching. Even while trapped in their own cloud of grief, Jacob’s family had found a way to benefit umpteen homeless cats.

Crossroads had a preponderance of unwanted cats. Homeless animals suffer a reputation of being moody, old, and unhealthy—which are not the desired traits of most families. Since there were so many cats to be taken care of, the employees didn’t have enough time to provide each animal with the attention they needed. Volunteers play a vital role at Crossroads. In order for the cats to become more people friendly, they must spend time with humans and be taught to interact.
The first volunteer I encountered was a teenage girl with blonde hair flowing down to her lower back. She kept to herself and brought three different cats into the designated playroom. The smile plastered on the girl’s face showed how much she adored the cats. While waltzing around, she cradled the furry animals like babies and hummed an unfamiliar tune. The second volunteer caught me off guard. While I was examining the lost pet billboard, the door slammed, and a deep, wheezy voice startled me.

“I think I’ll take Ray today! Yeah. I want Ray! Where is Ray?!” As I whipped my head around to see who was yelling, an image of Rubeus Hagrid from the Harry Potter series instantly came to mind. This man was large, bulky, and had a billowy red beard. Alyssa grabbed a green-stickered black cat and carried it to the man. He smiled a mouthful of crooked teeth and brought Ray into the human-sized cage to play.

Ray had been in the shelter for three years. His glossy black coat shone in the light from the windows. The cat had an odd mark by his left eye–most likely from a brawl with another animal. Black cats are known to be bad luck, and this stereotype has left multiple black cats unwanted. Ray was obviously accustomed to the routine of this man coming to visit, because the normally unsocial cat was purring while his visitor pet him.

The bizarre man made meowing noises at the cat–until Ray reciprocated with a savage hiss. He began crawling all over the bearded man, and I had to control my giggles as I heard him repeat monotonously, “Ouch. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.” The man never tried to pull Ray off of his head; he just remained still and allowed the cat to use him as a playground. Everyone seemed accustomed to this man, and no one bothered him.
“I come in here every Sunday for two hours. I like to play with the cats, and they like it when I visit them,” the man said while peering down at the cat scratching his tattered boots. He used to have a favorite cat, but somebody adopted her without letting him say goodbye. The bearded man, who I discovered was named Gary, fought in the Vietnam War, and had dreamt of adopting two cats from the shelter for many years. Spending time with the cats has been Gary’s therapy for the past five years, and the ritual visits are an important part of his life.

Gary, just as many of the shelter cats, has been accepted into this subculture. His peculiar charisma would not be welcomed in society, but while at the shelter, Gary is safeguarded from reality. He, along with many other volunteers and employees, receives the same acceptance he has provided for the cats. This inverse relationship is what has drawn many lost souls into the shelter.

While Gary and Ray continued to entertain each other, a middle-age woman with long curly hair sat on a bench near the door. She was dressed in dark colors, and her face held a content expression. Her gentle smile indicated that she was open to a conversation. Two of the volunteers were her 17-year-old twin daughters. They’ve been volunteering at Crossroads for five years, and they have ended up adopting more than 10 of the shelter cats.

“Sarah, the shyer of the two, has always had issues connecting with people. She lights up when she spends time with the cats, because she knows they won’t judge her in any way,” the woman said with a deep sigh. She continues on about the other twin, “Jordan just enjoys helping the cats. She has always looked for opportunities to help people out, and I think she has realized
how the cats impact her sister. Jordan definitely has taken over the big sister role, and I love coming here to watch them interact. This shelter is a magical place.”

Sarah had her hair tied back into a tight ponytail, and spent most of her time walking around with a cat nestled in her arms. Jordan, on the other hand, was constantly on the move. She spoke to various people around the shelter, and her contagious laughter echoed through the room. Both of the twins felt at home in the shelter, and I got the impression that these two girls were not always comfortable outside of this place. They were a bit quirky, and I would imagine they have had issues making friends. Crossroads has become the sheltered place where they can be themselves, make a difference, and spend time as a family.

Many other visitors came into the shelter. Each time someone new entered the lively room, the first question asked was, “Do you guys have any dogs or kittens?” This seemed to be ritual. After being told there weren’t currently any dogs or kittens, many people left before even looking at the old and desperate cats. As countless people walked out of the door, the hopeful energy of the shelter began to wither. Alyssa’s brow became furrowed as the third person retreated from the shelter in that hour.

“I don’t understand how people can come in here claiming they want to do a good thing and give an animal a loving home, but when the animals don’t meet their preconceived standards they turn around and leave. If someone actually wants to make a difference, the weight and eye color of the animal should have no impact on their decision,” she voiced. As more people continued to flow into the shelter, Alyssa routinely swooped in to assist. Alyssa was the cats’ only chance of finding a home. She represented them with a welcoming demeanor, and did her
best to show how special each of the cats were. If she didn’t stand up for them, nobody
would—which leaves the cats eternally trapped in the shelter.

Many people came in merely to look at the animals; they had no intention of adopting.
One particular couple stood out to me from the moment they hobbled through the doorway. It
was an old man and woman—presumably husband and wife. The old man had wiry gray hair and
was wearing clothing that may have been even too dressy for Sunday mass. The man trailed
behind the woman, watching her every move as if his life depended on it. The old woman had
voluminous white curls on top of her made-up face, and deep canals of wrinkles surrounded her
mouth. She walked to every cage, made baby coos, and said some loving words before moving
onto the next cage.

Her husband continued to follow her every move, and he explained with a grin, “She just
loves meetin’ all of the little guys. And I enjoy seeing her get such a kick out of it.” It was very
easy to see how much he loved the old woman. While she was giggling at a particularly plump
cat, he couldn’t hold back a blissful smile. Perhaps this is why Alyssa and her co-workers
choose to work in such a glum atmosphere everyday. They enjoy watching people light up while
connecting with the animals. Crossroads doesn’t only save animals from despair; humans with
heavy hearts may find sanctuary within the undesired— but loving—critters.

After the majority of visitors had left, Alyssa began the ritual clean up. Her normally
bubbly spirit seemed gloomy, and the bags under her eyes showed exhaustion. She had spent
three years working at Crossroads, and now she was preparing to move onto a real career.

“This isn’t just a job. It’s your life. If we aren’t here to take care of the animals, they
can’t survive. I’m the unofficial supervisor of the shelter, and I spend almost every single day
here. It’s actually quite exhausting.” She continued with a half-hearted laugh, “I guess I’ve chosen cats over my social life!”

Alyssa was extremely overwhelmed by all of her responsibilities. One of their staff members had recently left without notice, so all of the extra work was dropped onto her shoulders. Alyssa was, in a way, trapped. If she left the shelter to pursue her dreams, the animals would suffer. Stress and worry shone through her forced smiles. Working at the shelter is not a job filled with rainbows and happy-endings, it is actually a lot of heartache and anguish.

“It just amazes me how awful people can be. We’ve had people come into the shelter with knives, or sometimes they even threaten to punch us. I thought we would need to call the police only 20 minutes before you showed up today,” she spilled to me as a cat jumped onto her lap. Apparently, when she had refused to return a German Shepherd to its abusive owner, the giant man had raised his fist to her face before scampering out of the shelter. Sometimes people overreact to their animal’s behavior, decide it isn’t worth keeping, and dump the animal onto the shelter. This German Shepherd had nipped at the owner, and the man decided the dog either needed to be killed or taken in by the shelter. Of course, Alyssa accepted the dog with open arms.

“I don’t know what that man was doing to this sweetheart of a dog, but there is no way he would have nipped without being provoked in some way. I feel like half of the time people aren’t telling the truth when they abandon their pets, because they are embarrassed of themselves,” Alyssa said with a few disappointed shakes of her head.
Over the past three years, Alyssa has adopted three of the shelter cats. She takes home the ones she knows will never be adopted on their own. Many of the cats lose their spark of life while living in a cage, and Alyssa finds this to be one of the most difficult parts of her job.

“I watch it happen. The light leaves their eyes, and you can tell they have given up. I guess my job is to keep the light alive,” she said as she glanced around at the caged cats surrounding us. “I think many people take advantage of animal shelters. It’s their easy way out if something goes badly with their pet. They dump their issues onto us, and it really has become overwhelming for me,” Alyssa admits.

It is expected that the owner of an abandoned pet will donate to the shelter—even if it is only five cents—to show some appreciation towards the people taking care of their pet. Crossroads depends on the donations many people provide, because they aren’t a huge, well-known facility. However, Alyssa told me that this is too much to ask of some people.

“It is hard to find the motivation to work here some days. People are rude, but I’m still obligated to smile and keep my calm. And it’s extremely difficult to give SO much love to the cats, but receive no affection back,” she mumbled. It seemed like she was trying to convince herself that it was okay to move on and begin her life. The shelter had been Alyssa’s home for many years, and I’m sure she is scared to leave her safety net behind. Just like Gary, the twins, and the cats, Alyssa had found her niche inside of Crossroads’ accepting subculture.

Even through the challenging aspects of working at Crossroads Animal Shelter, Alyssa declared it a positive experience. She has learned many valuable lessons on how to cope with difficult people, and gets to experience the joy of seeing an animal find a loving home. The relationships formed and lessons learned have shaped her into the confident woman she is today.
“One of the best feelings is watching one of the antisocial animals truly connect with a person,” Alyssa said with glowing eyes. Through all of the ups and downs, Alyssa and her co–workers still find a purpose in working at the shelter. The pure satisfaction they receive from watching the animals–and humans–find acceptance, security, and love is what carries them through the gloomier days.

CONCLUSION

After my time at the shelter, I spent numerous hours thinking about Alyssa and the other unique personalities I had encountered during my visits. People of many backgrounds come into the shelter and find refuge in the accepting atmosphere. For this subculture, Crossroads Animal Shelter has become much more than a home for stray cats; it is their safe haven.

I had expected the shelter to be an uplifting place where miracles happen everyday; however, my assumptions proved to be wrong. Many days are smothered with sorrow and heartbreak, because there cannot be a happy ending for every lonely spirit in the shelter. Crossroads is not only a refuge for the animals–it is also a sanctuary for humans who don’t fit into society. There are many lost souls in the shelter. Some animals, along with some people–like Gary–will never find a true home. However, there are others, like Alyssa, who have the ability to move on, but are having a difficult time leaving the shelter behind. They have found comfort and stability in this lifestyle. After coming across countless lonely animals–and humans, they have learned to value the importance of acceptance.
Not only is Crossroads a dwelling for lonely spirits, but it is also a place where one can go to receive the satisfaction of making a difference. The volunteers and employees at the shelter find value in providing a dependable habitat for outcasted souls. Spending time with Alyssa and the volunteers has shown me how impactful a sense of belonging can be. Helping homeless animals provides volunteers and employees with a sense of purpose, and it also gives them an opportunity to find shelter in each other.

Works Cited


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