

Pekin residents recycle for TAPS

By Shannon Tebben-Sandoval

Times correspondent

PEKIN - Pekin residents Cherie and Rich Lee are doing what they CAN to make sure animals at the Tazewell Animal Protective Society have everything they need.

For nearly 12 years, they've been collecting aluminum cans for recycling and donating the proceeds to TAPS.

And that pun isn't the only one they've heard.

"I've been called a bag lady," Cherie Lee said of her habit of carrying plastic bags in the car to pick up stray cans along the road.

"When I retired (from Schramm School in 1994) they gave me a shirt that said 'the aluminum lady' with pieces of foil attached to the shirt."

It was while working at Schramm that Lee got the idea to start collecting the cans she noticed tossed alongside the roads.

"The first day I picked up 13. I thought, 'I can do something with this,'" Lee said.

"I decided to recycle the cans and give all the proceeds to TAPS."

Lee said she isn't sure why she chose TAPS, but she and her husband have always had pets and a fondness for animals, so it seemed like a good fit.

"Never in your life did you think it would go like this," she said.

In the past 12 years, the Lee's have donated thousands of dollars through their recycling efforts. The sheer volume of cans they collect often requires two or more trips with their pick-up truck to Pekin Recycling every week.

"When we started, we got 33 cents a pound, so to get \$100 we'd have to have 3,300 cans," Lee said. "Now they're paying 67 cents, so it has appreciated."

Last year alone they donated \$1,900 to the organization, and this year they are already up to \$1,400. That's the equivalent of nearly 3,000 cans so far this year.

"I think it's just marvelous that somebody would devote so much time - that's a lot of time and effort collecting all those cans," said TAPS board President Henry Cakora.

Cakora said the money raised by the Lees goes toward helping offset general operational expenses - TAPS is run completely by donations.

Every year the Lee's donation has increased, and so too has awareness of their project.

So many people help out now that Lee said it's practically like the retired couple has started a new business. In fact, her good friend Dot Spain has also joined in on the work.

Lee and her partners go looking for the cans, wearing rubber gloves to rummage through garbage cans at a local golf course or hitting other spots they know are likely to be heavily littered.

"John Q. Public is pretty sloppy," Lee said. "They throw them out the window."

But the cans also come to the Lees.

"We have people leave their cans up by the house," she said. "I play bridge and there's a sweet lady I play with at Pekin Estates who found out what I did and now there's a little basket out at Pekin Estates with a sign that says 'Cans for TAPS.'"

"Some people will bring us a small bag of cans and will apologize and I say, 'No, it takes pennies to make dollars,'" Lee said.

Lee used to save aluminum foil from the lunches at Schramm School, which is what earned her the shirt upon retirement.

And her hairdresser even saves the foil she uses for highlighting hair to donate to the cause. "Whatever people do is so appreciated - they are helping and no one wants any animal to be homeless," Lee said.

The project has also been a good learning experience for the Lee's seven grandchildren.

"They go with us (to the recycling center), watch them go up the chute and into the crusher and be weighed," she said. "Then we take (the money) directly out to the animals, so the children see what can be done. So now they save cans for us."

And although the cans are small, Lee knows the message of their project is huge.

"We can make a difference."