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TAPS celebrates 50 years; to honor volunteers

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By Valari Hyatt

Times correspondent

PEKIN - Volunteers have always been important to the homeless animals at Tazewell Animal Protective Society, and that is why they will be honored this weekend during TAPS' 50th Anniversary.

The kickoff to the weekend-long event starts on Saturday, Nov. 8, from 2 to 8 p.m.

Touted as a family event, Saturday's free activities include tours of the shelter with volunteer recognition and the sharing of TAPS adoption stories in the board room. Also, there will be children's games with prizes, raffles, door prizes, goodies and snacks, and more from 2 to 5 p.m.

After 5 p.m., there will be a bonfire and marshmallow/weenie roast with hayrack rides through the new TAPS Trails Park.

"It's all free and the public is also welcome to stay for the bonfire and weenie roast," said Alice Cakora, TAPS volunteer and event coordinator.

Active and special donors are invited to a semi-formal Open House on Sunday, Nov. 9 from 1 to 3 p.m. Hors d'oeuvres and wine will be served at this special no-animals-allowed party.

"This is a special invite to donors and guests and all those who donated to make this building, and anyone who would like to come," said Cakora. "But no animals are invited because we have some donors who are allergic to dogs or cats."

Volunteers have always been an important asset to TAPS and still are, according to TAPS Director Angela Blackman.

"We're always looking for more volunteers and we really do appreciate every one of them. This party," Blackman said, "is all about the volunteers. We couldn't do this without volunteers like Sheila Borton, our volunteer coordinator. She flows with energy and personality - she makes things happen. And then there's Marie and Shirley who answer phones - there's so many behind-the-scenes volunteers. We have about 100 active volunteers and I'd love to have 100 more."

History of care

Another long-standing volunteer is Marie Stoudt, a retired teacher who has worked with TAPS for 50 years. She has a ton of stories, starting from, well, the beginning.

"Paul and Irene (Chronic) never met an animal they could pass by. One day they were driving across the bridge when Irene looked down and saw a dog in the river. She made Paul go down there and I don't know how they did it, but they got that dog out of the river.

They kept that dog and that one became three and then three became six. That's how it was with them," Stoudt said.

"He was a school teacher and she was a nurse and they had some means and very many friends and they found some land on River Road - where there were shanties and shacks."

Stoudt said they built a shelter but eventually the levy broke and after the flood, they had to row the animals to shore. When they looked back, they couldn't see the shelter. It had all but disappeared under rising waters.

She recalls the volunteers being called "bleeding hearts" who were "trying to save every animal."

But, Stoudt contends, "Back then we didn't give shots or spay or neuter animals. You could buy a dog for \$7 or a cat for \$3. We just wanted to move them into homes. We had one paid manager and two paid employees and enough volunteers to staff the shelter. That was it."

Indeed, TAPS had the most humble of beginnings - no name, no home and no money. But, as Stoudt points out, it did have the love, determination and dedication of the Chronics and their friends.

Non-profit status

TAPS was officially chartered as a non-profit animal shelter in 1958. The City of Pekin provided land on River Road for the location of the shelter's first home, which was constructed by volunteers using donated materials.

In 1979, a rapidly rising Illinois River forced immediate evacuation, but a local veterinarian and friends of the shelter provided temporary homes until the city made available The Depot, located at the corner of Third and Broadway.

Then in 1989, a wall collapsed, resulting in the building being condemned. With only 24 hours to evacuate, the animals were once again rescued by volunteers and transported by rental van to another city-owned building on Koch Street.

Eventually, Tim and Lil Soldwedel deeded acreage, and several other benefactors provided funding for the construction of a new facility on Allentown Road, according to a history written by Shirley Wade, another long-standing volunteer.

Stoudt recalled how it all came down. "It was interesting. We just sat there, watching with our mouths wide open as one lady wishing to remain anonymous asked how much it would take to get things started. They said, '\$10,000' and she nonchalantly took her checkbook out of her purse and calmly wrote out a check for \$10,000 right then.

"Tim Soldwedel donated the land on Allentown Road and this got it all started."

That building opened in February 1990. Finally, the dogs and cats had a home of their own. But they would soon outgrow it.

Fifteen years later, board members recognized the need for a larger facility and began to envision a new shelter. Henry and Alice Cakora donated property to serve as the building site.

The Capital Campaign Committee, made up of community volunteers, secured the funds

necessary and a new building was dedicated in October 2006, at 100 TAPS Lane.

"Today, we've always got a wait list (to bring animals to the shelter)," Blackman said. "It's by appointment only. As soon as one departs, we add a new one. There's so little space - the building has increased but we could build it again three or four times the size and still need more room."

She adds, "Today, all of our animals are spayed or neutered, vaccinated and tested for diseases, and they're treated for tick and flea prevention. Our goal is to adopt out healthy, well-adjusted pets."

Some things

never change

Many things have changed over the last 50 years but two constants remain. "We still need to find homes for all of our animals and we still need volunteers to help us accomplish that," said Blackman. "Our volunteers are that important to us. And we really do appreciate every one of them."

No truer words were ever spoken, although some were written up in a TAPS 1981 newsletter, which reads in part, "TAPS continues to fight the confusion - we are not the 'County Animal Control Pound' on Wesley Road in Creve Coeur. We do not impound strays or collect animal registration money or receive thousands of tax dollars from each city in Tazewell County which charters with Animal Control. We are a non-profit organization, founded in 1957 by Paul and Irene Chronic and their many friends."

Even back in 1980, TAPS was ahead of the game, adopting out more than 60 percent of their dogs and 50 percent of their cats, which was at that time "well above the national average."

Money was just as crucial back then, and fundraisers brought it in from book sales held at County Market and Vogels Market Square.

Captain Jinks and Salty Sam helped TAPS chairwomen Jean Bruder and Sharon Rose during a 4-H Fair and Pet Show. A Mall Bazaar Sale held in October included a rummage sale, while Mrs. Larkin's Bake Sale at First National Bank brought in more funds. Even Young Edison Intermediate School students helped work on a "rainy, cold Saturday."

The newsletter also lists memoriums. One excerpt reads, "We acknowledge with appreciation donations to TAPS in the memory of Doris McCabe by the Green Valley Victoria Shrine and the Pythian Sisters of Pekin; donations in memory of Mable Buckley by M. Reiser, R. Trubett, A. Hoehn and M. Deraita; donations in memory of Lillian Jerew by G. Alexander, W. Zank, G. Starer, B. Owen, C. Coad, F. Hayes, R. Tomlinson, N. Guengerich, F. Dennis, L. Calvetti, H. Harrell, E. MacDonald, J.D. Soldwedel, J.E. Galvin, J.N. Shade, J.A. Boecker, P. Guidi, R. W. Lutticken; in memory of Cornelia Griffiths, donations from Dr. & Mrs. Lange, Mr. & Mrs. Jutticken; in memory of Robert Soady, Dr. & Mrs. Lange, Mr. & Mrs. Luttiken, G.R. Wolfer. The shelter appreciates your sensitive and thoughtful giving."

"We would especially like to thank Paul Koch, Lee Williams, L.E. Lewellin, and the Chamber of Commerce, Mayor Birkmeier and the city of Pekin, Drs. Lange, Springer, Petty and Towers, and last but not least, our dedicated shelter staff, manager Pat Carter, Lorrie McCain and Jim Stone."

That said, how many more volunteers and benefactors will be recognized at TAPS' 50th

Anniversary this weekend? And how many animals will it take to say thank you?

"From all of us," reads an excerpt from the 1981 newsletter, "the smallest kitten in the litter to the largest mutt in the run - thank you."

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