

PAWS ARE THE CAUSE

Local animal welfare organizations serve the needs of humans' best friends

By Alex Wilson

Nonprofit volunteers and donors play a critical role helping lost or neglected pets in Ventura County and also animal owners who sometimes struggle to pay unanticipated veterinary bills. The Ojai-based Humane Society of Ventura County and Ventura County Animal Services Foundation, which supports shelters in Camarillo and Simi Valley operated by county government, each play important roles in domestic animal welfare.

Ventura County Animal Services unveiled a new \$1.9 million mobile veterinary clinic

on Oct. 15 funded by the VCAS Foundation which also raised funds to staff the clinic for the first three years of operation.

Esteban Rodriguez took over as VCAS director one year ago after seeing the value of mobile clinics in places he worked previously including Seattle and Austin. Rodriguez told the Ventura County Reporter the commitment of volunteer nonprofit board members was critically important to getting the mobile clinic on the road.

"Our foundation for Ventura County Animal Services has been with us probably more than 30 years," Rodriguez said. "And it's a huge effort in how we build trust in the community, so they're highly valuable. These are also the people that donate year after year. So, whether the donation is small or large, it all helps us do what we need to do regarding this effort."

Rodriguez said the board members are also



VCAS staff in the mobile clinic's surgical suite. (VCAS/Submitted)

advocates in the community who support the good work VCAS does.

"They share the importance of the animals that are sitting here in our kennels, and they actually promote our animals for adoption, for rescue, for fostering," he said. "They're highly important on how we convey our message to the community."

Rodriguez said everyone is happy the mobile clinic will hit the road next month offering services to the community.

"I'm just really excited that our foundation saw the value in the vision of providing a spay and neuter vehicle to the community, and that they were behind it 100% from the first day we talked about it. They're an amazing board, they're an amazing partner with Ventura County Animal Services."

Dedicated board members

Christine Dale joined the board about three years ago. She's loved animals her whole life and used to have a horse, fish, birds and even pet rats, although her menagerie has shrunk to just one dog and one cat. Dale earned a master's degree in biology and an MBA and has worked for several biotechnology companies specializing in regulatory writing for oncology.

Dale told the VCReporter her time spent volunteering at VCAS helps her escape worrying about the problems of the world.

"I tend to be a doom scroller and I get really down, and then everything here is good news. I mean, the pets are at 90-plus percent adoption rate, everybody who works here is so dedicated and they're such good people," she said.

John Larson joined the board last year after retiring from a career in leadership at a large



VCAS Foundation Board, from left: Genie Tuttle, Debra Tosch, Dawn Knowles, Christine Dale, John Larson. (VCAS/Submitted)



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insurance corporation involving finance, operations and customer service, skills he's happy to use for the benefit of animals. Before he joined the board, he volunteered for five years with large-breed dogs and especially dogs with challenging behavioral issues.

"The animals are just something I'm really passionate about," Larson told the VCReporter. "Over time, because I'm here so much, I've made connections with different people. And because of my business background, it seemed like a good fit that there were some additional skills and sweat equity that I could bring to the table to help the foundation. And I just jumped at the chance because it was another way for me to make a difference on another level."

He was also looking for a new "purpose in life" after retiring from the corporate world.

"I was on a search for ways that I could contribute, ways that I could add value, ways that I can help the community and at the same time add enrichment to my own life. It just feels good to help," Larson said. "I'm just so grateful for the opportunities that I've had here. It's made a difference in my life, and I hope I've made a difference in people's and in the animals' (lives)."

Board member Debra Tosch has a full-time job at the Search Dog Foundation near Santa Paula where she's worked for 27 years, formerly as the director and now as director

of finance. She has deployed to disasters including the World Trade Center after 9/11, the 2005 La Conchita landslide and Hurricane Katrina which flooded New Orleans later that same year.

She wanted to work with animals other than dogs when she started volunteering at VCAS, so she joined the "bunny brigade." Now she also serves as treasurer of the board. She's happy VCAS has been able to support the mobile clinic.

"It's very exciting. We've been wanting to do something like this for a long time and when we got the new director, he was on board and it all came together quick," Tosch said.

"It took a lot of people to make this happen. It took staff. It took the county supervisors because they had to vote yes for us to be able to even give them the vehicle. So, everybody's been on board, and now we'll be able to just make a big difference in the community."

Tosch says everyone should consider volunteering for something they believe in, and working with animals can be rewarding even if it may seem daunting.

"It feels really good to get in the game," she said. "A lot of people say, 'Oh, I could never volunteer at the shelter because it's so sad' and all of that. Well, yeah, but the animals are stuck there. And so, I would rather suck it up and go beyond my own emotions about how sad it can be at a shelter to be part of the solution, and that's why I joined."



Ventura County Animal Services unveiled a new mobile vet clinic on Oct. 15. (Alex Wilson)

New leader for Humane Society

Daniel Roselle started as executive director of the Humane Society of Ventura County on Oct. 1, an organization which has advocated for local animals for more than 90 years.

He previously worked for the Hawaii Humane Society for 12 years, a nonprofit which also held a contract for municipal animal services in the Honolulu metropolitan area for a population of 1.1 million people, much like VCAS does in

Ventura County.

Roselle said the name humane society can be confusing because there are many different organizations with humane society in the name, and their methods of helping animals vary from advocacy to sheltering and serving the needs of pet owners.

"There is no national umbrella for humane

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societies. Every humane society has its own board, has its own list of policies and, in fact, has its own sort of structure. The name can be confusing for folks...It's more of a descriptor than it is a franchise," he told the VCR reporter.

Roselle didn't have any pets growing up. He held high-pressure jobs in the tech and airline industries prior to his career in animal services, he said.

"I adopted a cat for what I considered my mental health and to lower my blood pressure when I was in a stressful role. I discovered the nuances and personality of this one individual cat and that took me into researching and learning," he said.

Roselle started volunteering with animal groups which led to trapping stray cats so they could be neutered and released.

"Which, you know, helps prevent a lot of cats living in really rough situations. And so that was my entry into it," he said.

Making a difference

Roselle said people and animals form a deep connection and that's part of the reason volunteers find it so rewarding to help them.

"If we go back into history, animals have always been, especially companion animals like dogs, like cats, have been intrinsically linked to human development and human survival in many ways. And so, they are such a part of what it means, I think, to be human," he said.

Roselle said ever since he changed careers and went into animal services full time, he's been amazed by the people who devote their lives to the cause.

"There are so many people that I work with who have these incredible talents that they could have chosen any career," he said. "They've chosen to bring those talents to animal welfare and help save animals at scale."

He said it's not always the easiest work. "We have team members who work out in 110-degree weather to care for dogs who would rather be in a home. But people do this work because it provides for them the satisfaction of knowing that they're making a difference."

A new focus on outreach

Roselle said there have been lots of changes in the world of animal welfare just in the last 10 years and he's had a "front seat" to witness a lot of that.

"The thinking used to be that humane societies or animal welfare orgs are kind of like fortresses where people come and leave the animals and go back to their world," Roselle said.

"The thinking has shifted where it's our job to go out to the community, to keep pets out of shelters, to do everything we can to keep pets in with their families," he said, mentioning discounted or free preventative treatments and pet food banks.

"The focus is so much on how can we go



Daniel Roselle is the new executive director of the Humane Society of Ventura County. (Submitted)

where the need is in the county. You know, how can we put our boots on and drive and go out where the need is," Roselle said.

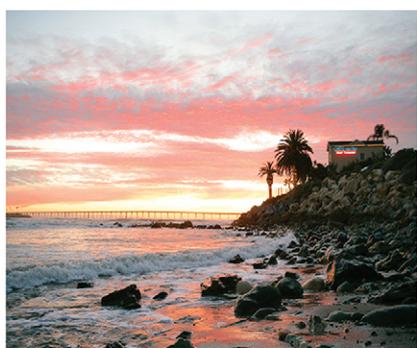
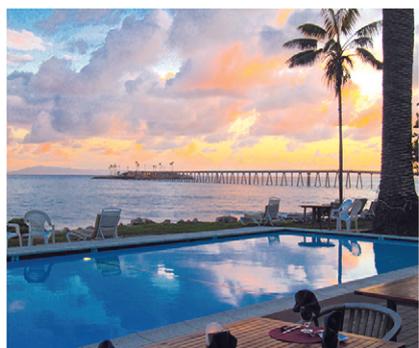
"We have volunteers and board members who are in the rivers and under the bridges and you know, working with those who have housing insecurities and who have pets to deliver those services," he said. "And I think as our organization continues to grow and as the need continues

to evolve, I think you'll see us more and more there where the need is." ♦

Ventura County Animal Services Foundation: animalservicesfoundationofventuracounty.org.

Humane Society of Ventura County: www.hsvc.org

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