

PAWS puts furry faces in the adoption market

By Jon Anderson
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

City watch

Put dogs and cats in fancy store windows along North Michigan Avenue and Oak Street.

Dress up volunteers in yellow T-shirts with the logo "See Me To Adopt This Dog" and send them out, walking dogs, to parks and beaches of the Lincoln Park area on weekends.

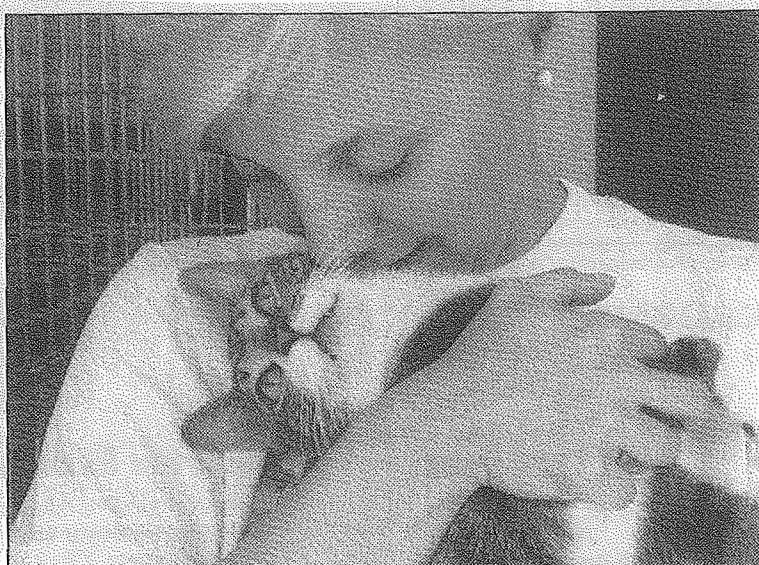
Set up a storefront on a busy stretch of North Clark Street. Fill it with dogs, plus a selection of serene, mature cats, many of them purring, all of them eager

for a lap.

"It's all Marketing 101," said Paula Fasseas, chief planning and development officer of the Metropolitan Bank Group, talking of her after-hours obsession, snatching the city's unwanted pets from the jaws of death and directing them toward warm, loving homes.

PAWS, an acronym for Pets Are Worth Saving, her booming dog-and-cat operation, scarcely 4

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Tribune photo by Heather Stone

Paula Fasseas, founder of PAWS, nuzzles one of the cats that was adopted Saturday from the PAWS Adoption Center, 2337 N. Clark St. The organization helps find owners for homeless pets.

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Tribune photo by Heather Stone

Volunteer Arya Barirani (center), 31, of Chicago holds Charlie as a woman passing by the PAWS Adoption Center pets the dog. Volunteers walk the dogs around the neighborhood to promote pet adoption.

PAWS

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months old, reflects a maxim of retailing, "location, location, location."

But it is more than that.

"People need to see these animals. Look at their faces. See their eyes. These are wonderful, quality pets, not damaged goods. But they are tucked away in shelters. Shelters can't afford good locations. And they don't have money to market what they have," Fasseas began, when a visitor asked to hear the story of PAWS.

What Fasseas and her crew do, early each Saturday morning, is to make a station-wagon run to the city pound, at 2741 S. Western Ave. There, they fetch a dozen dogs and a dozen cats.

Most are chosen on the basis of their seniority at the pound, a status that, to put it delicately, is not a good thing for an animal to have.

"She and her group are literally lifesavers," said Gene Mueller, a veterinarian and executive director of the Chicago Commission on Animal Care and Control, the city agency that runs the ever-crowded pound, where 40,000 dogs and cats are put to death each year.

About half are suitable for adoption, Mueller said. Many are pets turned over to the pound by owners who move or no longer want

them. The problem is matching such animals with new owners, few of whom know about the pound or want to go there.

"We're known in neighborhoods down here," Mueller said, "but what we really want to do is to market our pets throughout the City of Chicago." That kind of outreach, he hopes, in a goal shared by Fasseas, might someday make Chicago a "no-kill city."

Toward that end, the PAWS dream is to open more centers, pull in animals from more shelters, push for low-cost spaying and neutering, keep down the number of unwanted animals and help find homes for all "angels with tails" who need them.

It's a cause that, for Fasseas, started with a small shaggy dog she saved from death last winter while she and her husband, Peter, the bank group's founder, were vacationing with their children on the Greek island of Crete, where police routinely poison strays.

The dog, a Scotty-looking animal now named Pippen, came home with them even though, as Fasseas noted, "we'd never had a dog. We've always lived in high-rise apartments."

Pulling together friends, plus an ad agency (Ogilvy & Mather) to do pro bono work designing fliers and a program, Fasseas called up stores on Michigan Avenue and Oak Street, asking them to participate in

"PAWS Chicago: Angels With Tails Walking Tour."

The event, in late May, put pets from three shelters and the pound in windows of such retailers as Pavillon Christophe, Escada, Ralph Lauren, FAO Schwartz and Barneys New York.

"We opened our shelter in late July, just before our second event, on West Armitage," Fasseas said, giving a tour of what is now the PAWS adoption center, at 2337 N. Clark St.

Open on weekends, plus weeknights for cats only, its two rooms are filled with volunteers answering phones (at 773-244-3248) and grooming animals. "I've taken all of them out for a walk today," said Arya Barirani, a volunteer. "People stop me, ask what kind of a dog it is and how old, I give them fliers and encourage them to come here."

Adoption charges run from \$42 to \$56.50, the same fees the pound charges.

"We had a sheep dog, but we had to put him down several months ago," noted browser Valerie Gangas, taking away a Polaroid snapshot of a possible replacement.

Thus far, PAWS has placed 400 animals, including two dogs to a couple who said, "We're going to our beach house in Maine for a month. Do you think the dogs would mind going?"

"I think they could handle it," Fasseas told them.