



A Coalition of Caring

Bringing shelters and rescues together to save lives

By Sandy Miller

Mindy had come to the end of a long and difficult road. The little shih-tzu/poodle mix had been dumped off at a Phoenix shelter by people who, judging from her condition, had cared little, if at all, for her.

Mindy's body told the story of a lifetime of neglect. She had a bad hind leg, a hernia the size of a tennis ball hanging from her stomach and a jaw so badly infected she was unable to close her mouth. Her coat was matted and filthy, and full of twigs, foxtails and burrs. She had scabs and scars all over her body from flea and tick bites.

The shelter veterinarian examined her and wrote in her notes: "This dog has been neglected for a very, very long time. Rescue needed immediately or put to sleep by the end of the day. Do not hold until morning."

A shelter employee picked up the phone and called Pam Heine with Finding Fido, a Phoenix rescue organization. Could Heine help Mindy? Heine headed over to the shelter to meet her. The dog she saw in the kennel broke her heart.

"She was curled up in a ball, shivering, and looked up at me with the saddest eyes I'd ever seen," Heine says. "I decided that it was best for her to be put to sleep and end her suffering, but I decided to take her out for a walk and a quick trip to McDonald's [first]. Once on a leash, her demeanor changed. She had a glimmer of hope in her eyes and that was all I needed. I still didn't know if we could save her, but she was at least going to get a cheeseburger and a trip to our vet."

Like many rescue organizations, Finding Fido operates on a

shoestring budget. There isn't much in the coffers to take on dogs with serious medical needs like Mindy's. Luckily, Finding Fido is one of a hundred rescue organizations and shelters that partner with the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition (PACC911), which has a special Emergency Medical Fund they can tap into to help dogs like Mindy. There was hope for Mindy after all.

A better way

Bari Mears has always loved animals. In her day job, she worked as an account executive and manager in radio and television broadcasting. But when five o'clock rolled around, she volunteered her time to animal welfare organizations, sitting on several boards and organizing fundraisers.

It was at an animal welfare conference in Chicago back in 1999 that Mears experienced what she called a real "eye opener."

"There were so many little groups trying to survive, to raise money and do their own piece of the puzzle," Mears remembers. "It dawned on me that to bring them together would strengthen the momentum and be a louder voice for the animals. One of the important things I felt needed to happen was that these groups needed to speak well of each other. It was very important that they supported each other."

So when Mears returned to Phoenix, she started calling shelters and rescues in Maricopa County and brought them together for adoption events. Then she talked car dealerships, businesses, shopping centers and churches into providing free venues for the adoptathons. The Phoenix Animal Care Coalition was born.

Today, the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition has more than 100 partner organizations and holds at least a dozen large adoption events a year. Between 2004 and 2008 alone, more than 3,600 animals found homes at these events. "Because of these events, we have found new homes for many dogs and cats in need," says Aprille Hollis, public information officer for Maricopa County Animal Care and Control, a PACC partner.

Dogs like Lady, one of the animals Maricopa County Animal Care and Control brought to a two-day adoption event a few years ago. Debra White, a PACC board member, remembers Lady well.

"She was an older Lab mix – the kind of dog every shelter has too many of," White says. "She was there all weekend and no one had picked her. On Sunday afternoon, a woman adopted Lady. There wasn't a dry eye at our table when she left with her." At a recent event, a woman came up to White with a dog. It was Lady. Her person had renamed her Ginger and she was living a wonderful life. "It's a good feeling knowing you're getting animals into good homes," White says.

Education is another important component of the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition. Through a writing and art contest called Breaking the Chain, third-graders in Maricopa County schools learn about the importance of kindness to animals.

Best Friends Animal Society recently became one of the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition's first out-of-state partners. "I think it's a stellar organization," says Lezlie Sage, Best Friends adoption program coordinator.

"They've done an amazing job. Something similar should be in every city."

The healing begins

The day after rescuing Mindy from the shelter, Heine took her to a veterinarian, still unsure if she could be helped. "He took her in the exam room and came back shaking his head," Heine says. "Her leg had some ligament damage which was never fixed, the hernia had probably been there for several years, and her jaw was the result of some blunt-force trauma. The infection had been left untreated for so long that it had spread into the jaw and completely rotted the bone."

Still, the veterinarian felt there was hope for the little dog. "She's in bad shape, but I think I can fix her," he told Heine. But, Mindy's veterinary bills would be extensive.

"We are a small group with very limited funds and minimal

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Opposite: Debra White. Above: Pam Heine.

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donations, so she was a bank buster for us,” Heine says. So, she applied for help from PACC’s Emergency Medical Fund, which paid for half of Mindy’s surgeries. Mindy’s hernia was repaired, 10 teeth were pulled, her broken leg was set and half of her bottom jaw was removed. Mindy was on the mend.

“That was a huge help for us,” Heine says. “Because of the Emergency Medical Fund, we’re able to take in more animals needing more medical care who would otherwise be euthanized.”

To date, the Emergency Medical Fund has given out \$230,000 to help animals with special medical needs; the money comes from donations and a variety of fundraisers held throughout the year. The fund also gets proceeds from sales from the PACC online store and sales of animal-themed books written by Mears.

Other collaborations

Money laundering is a bad thing, a crime that can bring prison time. But a program called Laundering Money is a good thing, because it gives shelter animals something clean and soft to sleep on during the cold winter months. The Phoenix Animal Care Coalition made arrangements with a local laundry, Spin Cycle, to pick up and wash 28 bags of blankets and towels a month from area shelters and then deliver the clean laundry back to them. The program is funded by donations.

The Phoenix Animal Care Coalition has also reached out beyond the Arizona border. Last year, the organization’s partners helped the Colorado-based National Mill Dog Rescue save the lives of some Missouri puppy-mill dogs.

Mears also created an extensive e-mail network. Each day, she sends out photos and bios of dogs and cats on shelter euthanasia lists to every individual and organization in her network. “The more people we can get on it, the more lives we’ll save,” Mears says.

Mindy’s new life

Mindy’s story speaks to the resilience and the forgiving nature of dogs. The day after her first surgery, Mindy sat up in her kennel, tail wagging, greeting the vet techs and anyone else who happened to walk by. And she just kept on getting better.

“When we brought her home, it was as if she had a new lease on life,” Heine says. “She was eternally happy and never seemed to have a bad day. Despite her neglect, she loved all people and animals. She quickly learned the pleasures of sleeping on the sofa and sleeping in bed.”

It wasn’t long before Mindy found her forever home. Bernadette and Tim Murphy were looking for another dog to join their family, which included a schnauzer/poodle mix named Bear. They adopted Bear back in 2006 from the Arizona Animal Welfare League, another PACC partner organization. Bear had come from an abusive situation and was very skittish. “We thought another dog would socialize him a little more,” says Bernadette Murphy.

In the spring of 2007, Murphy was looking at rescued dogs on her home computer and came across the Finding Fido website. That’s where she first saw Mindy. “I thought she was a sweetie,” Murphy says.

The Murphys met Mindy and Heine at a Phoenix park – and it was love at first sight. “She was very happy, very excited,” Murphy says. “We took her home from the park.” Today, Mindy and Bear are the closest of friends.

The Murphys took Mindy to the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition’s annual Hope for the Animals luncheon. Mindy was definitely one of the stars of the event. “It was a really big deal,” Murphy says. “She loves everybody and her tail didn’t stop wagging. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.”

Mindy has come a long way from that sad little dog Heine first saw in the kennel at the shelter. “She’s a lesson for me every day,” Heine says. “No matter how bad things used to be, there is always a future, so make every day a good one.” 🐾



Above: Bari Mears and friends.

Learn more about the Phoenix Animal Care Coalition at www.pacc911.org. First Home Forever Home is one of four Best Friends campaigns aimed at reaching the goal of No More Homeless Pets. Read more at network.bestfriends.org/foreverhome.