

PETS PLUS

Featur

SIV SCHWINK: PAWS FOR THOUGHT

KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER

Group helps pet owners get through tough times



When Shelby lost great patches of fur and developed a severe skin infection, her owner knew it was serious and that she needed veterinary attention. What could be causing her skin to be so oily and stinky, and at the same time sap all of the terrier's usual energy?

Shelby's owner faced the same pressing question that many pet owners struggle with from time to time: Would the veterinary care Shelby so clearly needed prove unaffordable? Would it be a luxury her owner couldn't provide for her?

Pet owners in East Central Illinois have resources to help ensure a positive outcome in cases like this one — because financial means shouldn't be the biggest obstacle to the maintenance of a beloved pet's good health.

The Companion Animal Resource and Education Center works with pet owners to pull together these resources — and even has a Helping Paw Fund for the care of companion animals in times of crisis or financial instability. One of the CARE Center's primary goals is to keep pets healthy and prevent their relinquishment to animal shelters.

At the same time, the nonprofit group works to educate pet owners and to promote spay/neuter to limit overpopulation.

Contact info

For more information on the Companion Animal Resource and Education Center, to apply for assistance or to make a donation, visit carecentercu.org, call 417-3160 or write to CARE, P.O. Box 161, Urbana, IL 61803.

With help from the CARE Center, Shelby's hypothyroidism, the underlying health condition that caused her unusual symptoms, was diagnosed and treated. Within a few months, Shelby was herself again, able to run and play and enjoy all the good things — like petting and cuddling — that life has to offer.

"We work with people to be able to keep their pets and keep their family together," said Susan Helmink, president and a co-founding member of the CARE Center. "We want to make sure pet owners have the information they need to decide whether to pursue veterinary treatment or not. Understanding cost and available resources helps inform that decision and can prevent relinquishments.

"Relinquishments are devastating to the pet and also to the pet owner — a pet may be a best friend. Having to break up that family is devastating."

Since 2007, the Helping Paw Fund has provided more than \$20,000 in aid to more than 100 pets — most commonly to cats and dogs, but also to other companions like rabbits and guinea pigs. The fund helps support routine veterinary care such as spay/neuter surgery and vaccinations, as well as diagnostics and treatment for illness and injury. It has helped treat conditions like heartworm disease, broken limbs and dental extraction, just to name a few. The fund has also assisted with consultations for behavioral problems related to litter box training or separation anxiety.

"People find out about our services in a number of ways," Helmink said. "Many are referred by the Champaign County Humane Society. We also get referrals from local vets who have worked with us. We enjoy partnering with local vets; in many cases, they will provide discounted services when there are financial limitations to seeking treatment.

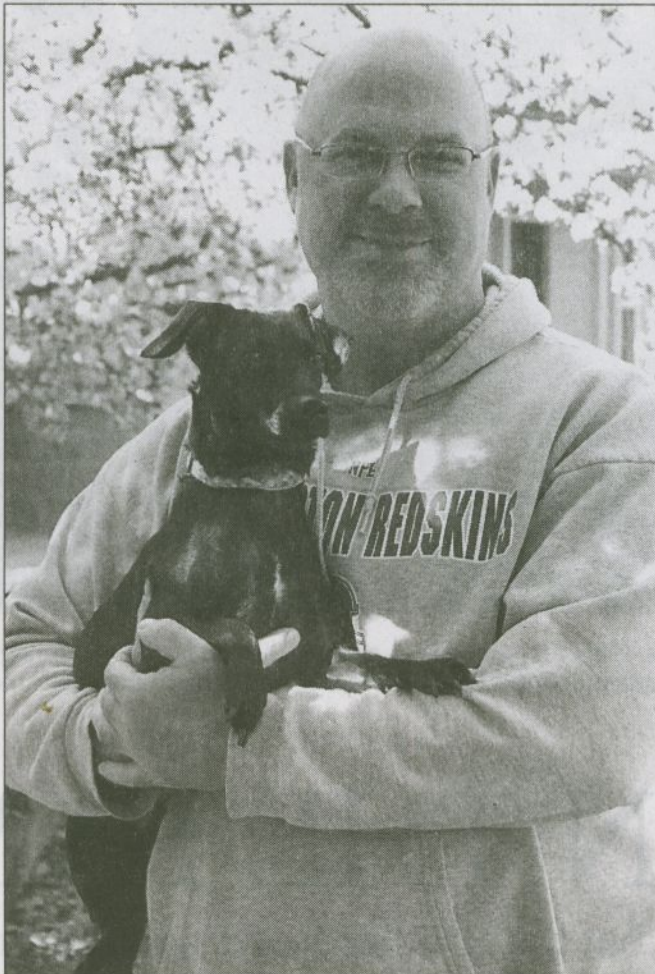
"We have an application people fill out so that we can learn their situation and the situation of their animal."

During the application process, CARE board members work to assess financial need and to determine what resources might be available, whether it's help from the pet owner's friends and family members or an outside program or discount offered through a chosen care provider. Based on individual circumstances, board members may authorize financial assistance to cover part or all of necessary veterinary care.

"We are very much a working board. Board members will often attend the appointment so we can quickly authorize additional tests or treatment," Helmink said. "We pay the vet directly our portion, and we follow up and check on the pet's progress, to see that the owner has been able to see the treatment through.

"If it's safe for an animal we are helping to be spayed or neutered and vaccinated — we do require that, though not necessarily at the time of initial care."

The CARE Center is run entirely by volunteers. It was founded in 2004 with the immediate goal of providing education and resources that foster a mutually supportive bond



Brad Hudson

Chris Gadow found his dog, Shasta, in a parking lot, and the CARE Center assisted with heartworm testing, vaccinations and a physical exam. Shasta was spayed through the Central Illinois Animal Welfare Coalition voucher program. Gadow said he 'never would have been able to keep Shasta without the help of the CARE Center.'

between companion animals and people. The fund was initiated later, based on recommendations from animal welfare proponent and veterinarian Sally Foote of Tuscola. A sizable donation was obtained from a foundation, and that money was invested in the hopes that it will grow to be a self-sustaining fund.

The fund also is supported by regular donations from community members totaling anywhere from \$2,000 to \$8,000 annually, from grants like the \$1,500 received last fall from the PetCo Foundation, and by the proceeds of the center's annual fundraiser, "CARE for a Taste?" (the date for the 2013 event has yet to be set).

Helmink said the CARE Center was thrilled to receive a recent \$5,000 donation from Dixie and Greg Whitt of Urbana.

Dixie Whitt said the couple's own pets motivated them to give.

"We have been fortunate that we could have our pets spayed or neutered as well as provide them with appropriate medical care," she said. "Because so many people do not have that option, we want to support the Helping Paw Fund in hopes that it will improve the lives of both companion animals and their people."

Helmink said that, aside from financial donations, community members who want to help keep the CARE Center going can volunteer in a number of roles, whether by filling board positions, helping to post fliers, planning fundraisers, maintaining the mailing list or helping with the website.

For animals like Callie, a local cat who needed surgery after being shot in her front leg with a pellet gun, or Oscar, a local service dog who needed a teeth cleaning and treatment for chronic ear infection, the Helping Paw Fund made a crucial difference in ensuring quality of life.

This column is dedicated to your pets in the News-Gazette circulation area. If you have a special pet story you'd like to share, please send an email to Siv Schwink at pets.illinois@gmail.com. Schwink is a freelance writer and interpretive naturalist. She lives in the country with her three kids, a dog, three rabbits, a budgie and two ferrets.