

Remembering & Moving Forward

Two-Year Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina By Gloria Dauphin

On August 31, 2006 a crowd of a hundred or so people gathered on nearly 11 acres to break ground on an uneven plot of land shadowed by the Crescent City Connection Bridge that spans the Mississippi River and links the two geographical banks of New Orleans – east and west. It was only two days after the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the bulldozer, hard hats and lone trailer bore the trademarks of New Orleans' poignant and daily life. A daily life underscored by an urgent need to rebuild and recover. But this was not a typical day of recovery and this was not a typical groundbreaking ceremony. There was a feeling of celebration in the air and unlike any other rebuilding project in New Orleans – there were the dogs. On this hot, windy day there was Café Au Lait, a shy pit bull mix sporting a hard hat; there was the fluffy Shepherd mix who relieved himself on the New Orleans brass band musician's tuba; there was Delilah, the Schnauzer mix; and there was the Golden Retriever Lexie – the digging dog. Unrehearsed and as if magically inspired by everyone's emotional cue, Lexie broke ground with gusto, digging happily into the sandy dirt and triumphantly signaling the rebuilding of the Louisiana SPCA.

AN URGENT NEED TO REBUILD When the Louisiana SPCA lost its shelter in the massive flooding following Katrina, it lost more than just a building. It lost a place where a community could bring homeless and stray animals that would otherwise face a dire and dangerous existence on the streets. It lost a place where low income residents could seek medical treatment for its animals when they couldn't afford to do so anywhere else. It lost a place where a committed staff would work tirelessly to find new homes for animals that so desperately needed a second, third, and as many chances as possible to find a loving home. As the only humane organization and open admission animal shelter in New Orleans, the story of the 119-year-old organization is all too familiar to those who were so emotionally struck by the animal tragedy that unfolded in the aftermath of Katrina. On the heels of that loss, the Louisiana SPCA went on to establish and lead what would ultimately become the largest animal shelter and animal rescue operation in U.S. history, saving over 8,500 animals in the first few weeks with the aid of countless colleagues and volunteer from all around the world. The Louisiana SPCA experienced devastating losses. But like the unstoppable Lexie who dug into the newly broken ground with unadulterated joy, the organization never lost sight of its vision to create a better place for its animals and an improved humane ethic on all levels. The triumphant groundbreaking signaled not only a rebirth but also a desire to move beyond the tragedy in order to re-establish the best animal care services in the state.

MOVING FORWARD As foundation slabs were being poured and piles were driven into the ground, the Louisiana SPCA continued on with the tasks at hand. In September 2006 the Louisiana SPCA participated in the country's first-ever joint animal and human rescue drill. Coined "Operation Lilypad," the drill was designed to test communications between Urban Search and Rescue teams operating in a flood environment. The drill incorporated real-life scenarios, duplicating many of the

tragedies that were witnessed repeatedly in the aftermath of Katrina. "Operation Lilypad" was the culmination of months of planning by many organizations working together to not only discuss, but actually incorporate animals into all future disaster planning. The end of 2006 also saw a familiar sight at the Louisiana SPCA's temporary facility; the transport of adoptable animals to partner shelters across the country. The Houston SPCA, SPCA of Texas in Dallas, the Humane Society of Knox County in Maine and Labs4Rescue helped the Louisiana SPCA manage its shelter population and practically guarantee loving homes for an amazing and adoptable mix of companion animals. By the end of September alone, 33 dogs had been transported and successfully adopted by the Humane Society of Knox County; 34 cats had equal success at the SPCA of Texas in Dallas; and 41 dogs were adopted from the Houston SPCA. Additionally, ten Labs were placed in forever home by Labs4Rescue. These "caravans of love" continue presently, powered by the hard work of Louisiana SPCA's committed volunteer force. On November 3, 2006 the Louisiana SPCA held its signature fundraising gala, Howling Success, which benefits the hundreds of homeless and neglected animals the organization serves everyday. The 2006 gala was the 25th Annual Howling Success and had it not been for Hurricane Katrina, November 2005 would have been our 25th year. One of the highlights of the evening was the presentation of the Dorothy Dorsett Brown Humanitarian of the Year Award to New Orleans broadcasting icon, Angela Hill. Well known for her dedication to animal welfare causes, she was celebrated for her work in broadening the public's understanding of the needs of companion animals and recognizing the integral role they play in our lives. Also honored was our own Kathryn Destreza, Director of Humane Law Enforcement, for her dedication and hard work over her 14-year tenure with the Louisiana SPCA.

ADVOCATING & PROTECTING ANIMALS As the Louisiana SPCA entered 2007, the organization continued its work in humane law enforcement aimed at reducing animal cruelty. On a given day that department receives anywhere from 50 to 100 calls of all kinds. Louisiana SPCA humane officers saw a disturbing trend in animal cruelty cases – those tinged with the residue of Hurricane Katrina. They were finding scarred animals in vacant buildings and homes that appeared to be the victims of dog fighting. In January, the department reported a surge in suspected dog fighting activity, seeing more cases of this type than even prior to Katrina. Throughout the first two quarters of 2007, humane officers handled numerous dog fighting investigations, responded to countless cruelty and neglect cases; provided expert testimony in criminal trials resulting from animal cruelty and dog fighting arrests; and handled a major horse cruelty case that has yet to go to trial. In February, the expert testimony of Kathryn Destreza, the Louisiana SPCA's Director of Humane Law Enforcement, led to the conviction of a major dogfighter, Clinton Bartell Schneider Jr., who has been considered one of the principal violators of the illegal activity in Louisiana. "This is a huge win because Black River Kennels has been a major supplier in the dog fighting world. This signals a major victory in our war on this horrific blood sport," said Destreza. In April, Louisiana SPCA was called upon by federal authorities to participate in a major drug trafficking bust in Louisiana and Mississippi to manage the dog fighting component, due to their recognized depth of expertise in handling such cases. In its advocacy work, the Louisiana SPCA worked vigorously to see an end to the brutal blood sport of

cockfighting. When New Mexico outlawed the activity in March of this year, the Louisiana SPCA called upon state leaders to finally put an end to an outdated activity. "The whole country is already focused on Louisiana due to our massive rebuilding and recovery efforts, and no one wants to see Louisiana blemished with the stigma of being the only state that still allows such a brutal and inhumane practice," said Louisiana SPCA's Laura Maloney. In June, the state saw a measured victory, but a victory nonetheless, with a cockfighting ban finally approved by lawmakers. Though the actual ban on the sport will not happen until August 15, 2008, Maloney was encouraged by the immediate ban that will make it illegal to gamble at cockfights. "Without the potential for betting and winning money, the sport will lose its allure for people." In other advocacy and longtime recovery work, the Louisiana SPCA formed a partnership with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) in April 2007 called the Louisiana Partnership. The two separate and independent organizations partnered together to assist animal welfare agencies dealing with surpluses of homeless pets by providing financial and human resources to positively impact agency conditions and save rates for animals. The partnership will offer training and operational advice for six communities in southwestern Louisiana. The ASPCA will provide grants for special projects as each agency is evaluated. The St. Bernard Parish Animal shelter, located in one of the hardest hit areas by Katrina, is the first organization being assisted through this partnership. Other parishes receiving assistance include Jefferson, Vermillion, Calcasieu, Caddo and Lafayette. Many of our community-based programs made a positive impact that was significant and immediate. Since the Louisiana SPCA incorporated the region's spay/neuter voucher program into its menu of programs and services, the number of vouchers redeemed tripled to over 1,000 redeemed in May and June alone; the number of participating veterinarians increased, and the number of partner agencies distributing vouchers has increased. In our Care Cadet Program, a highly popular educational program for adolescents which is designed to develop responsible pet owners and humane educators, class attendance doubled and we were forced to hold two camps versus the traditional one camp session.

REBUILDING THE LOUISIANA SPCA Amidst the organization's daily work to improve the lives of animals, the year following Katrina was equally dominated by the launching of the Louisiana SPCA \$17 million capital campaign, titled "Come.Stay.Heal." Moving beyond the destruction of Katrina, the Louisiana SPCA envisioned a three-phase Louisiana SPCA Campus. Phase I was designed to establish the basic functions of animal sheltering in New Orleans, providing a space for animal control services, stray animal collection, and cruelty investigations. The Adoption Center is located in this building temporarily while the second phase is being constructed. This facility has a small veterinary clinic to provide medical care to the shelter's animals and a classroom that is used for training and educational programs. The cost to build Phase I - \$8 million. Phase II focuses on the human/animal bond by expanding our humane education programs, low-cost veterinary care center, and adoption program. A community education center will offer programs ranging from teacher training to juvenile intervention, as well as provide space for summer camp and programs for the special needs population. The Veterinary Care Center will re-establish the Louisiana SPCA's public, low-cost

services providing access to preventative care and treatment. This phase will also feature real-life home setting for each adoptable pet, similar to a boutique hotel concept. Phase II cost is targeted at \$5 million. Phase III, to cost \$4 million, will expand the breadth and depth of our services to bring more people to the campus as well as redefine the concept of animal sheltering. A training facility will be built for agility competitions and animal sports. A Doggie Day Care/Boarding Facility will provide socialization for pets while earning income for operations. Also envisioned are social entrepreneurship programs that will include hosting a Farmers Market and developing Pet-Friendly Housing Lots, a lateral pet walking path, and a coffee shop/pet bakery.

A Campus is Born With a targeted completion date of May 18, construction crews worked furiously to complete Phase I. With fundraising at a vigorous pace, the Louisiana SPCA marked a major milestone in the organization's history with the awarding of a major gift from the Joe W. and Dorothy Dorsett Brown Foundation in New Orleans, a long time supporter of the non-profit. The Joe W. and Dorothy Dorsett Brown Foundation has been the largest single donor and supporter of the Louisiana SPCA throughout the history of the organization, and over the years, their cumulative contributions have sustained the Louisiana SPCA during some of its most difficult times. In fact, it was through the direct work of Mrs. Brown that resulted in the building of the former Japonica Street shelter, which was destroyed during Hurricane Katrina. On April 16 the 10.7 acre land was officially named the "Dorothy Dorsett Brown – Louisiana SPCA Campus."

AN AMAZING REBIRTH Nine months after Lexie broke ground and 17 months after operating a full-scale animal shelter out a temporary, makeshift warehouse, the Louisiana SPCA unveiled Phase I – the 21,600 square-foot Animal Rescue and Care Center. As one member of the media described it, "This facility is an airy, inviting place that doesn't look or smell like a typical animal shelter. There are lots of windows and skylights, special ventilation systems and music. The bold pet paintings of artist-in-residence Aida Kansas cover a front wall, adding color and personality to the atmosphere." The amazing rebirth was hailed by colleagues nationwide as a major triumph of recovery from one of the country's largest natural disasters, after the organization lost its shelter, 80% of its staff and its entire infrastructure in Hurricane Katrina. "The amount of devastation suffered by our friends on the Gulf Coast was unprecedented," said Ed Sayres, president and CEO of the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). "It's a triumphant story of recovery in the face of extreme challenges and a testament to the organization's undying commitment to improve the lives of animals, against all odds." For the Louisiana SPCA, it's the silver lining that has emerged from this difficult life-changing experience that our community of people and animals has experienced. Building from the ground up the Louisiana SPCA has seized the opportunity to build a shelter that incorporates the "best practices" of the animal welfare industry. As Maloney described it recently, "We're excited about every aspect – from the big vision of it being a fully phased concept in animal sheltering embracing both a shelter for animals, an educational facility for the public and a way of improving our community's quality of life – all the way down to the nuts and bolts.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING As the Louisiana SPCA marks the second year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the completion of Phase I marks only the beginning of the fully realized Dorothy Dorsett Brown – Louisiana SPCA Campus. While many of our goals have long-term impact, the next 3-5 years involves rebuilding, launching education initiatives, and making an impact legislatively. The Louisiana SPCA recognizes clearly that their challenge is to not only rebuild, but also to continue to operate at the highest standards, raise the bar and make improvements that serve our animal community in not only the short term but the long term. We also lost our local donor base and the support we received nationwide is amazing and wonderful but we are also aware that long term survival has to come directly from our community as those thousands of local donations are vital to any non-profit. Phase I is only the beginning, and fundraising continues for the future phases. For the animals of Louisiana, the Louisiana SPCA desperately wants to see a reduction in animal overpopulation. We want to change the cultural mindset about spaying and neutering and work toward cultivating a more informed and compassionate public so that cruelty and neglect is minimized. The Louisiana SPCA recognizes that education and fostering a respectful community is key to that success. Having to build a new shelter, operating out of a temporary shelter, rebuilding a staff, serving a community still dealing with loss even as we deal with our own loss, rescuing and sheltering the hundred of animals that enter our shelter each month takes a dogged focus and passion. And most importantly we have not stood alone. There are thousands of individuals, organizations and communities to whom we are eternally grateful and that have made it possible for us to experience our rebirth. Without them we would not be where we are today. As this 119-year-old animal welfare organization remembers Katrina two years later it has faced the wrath of Katrina head on and, like Lexie, will never lose our passion for breaking new ground.

Gloria Dauphin is the Assistant to the CEO of the Louisiana SPCA. She was a volunteer for three years before joining the Louisiana SPCA on August 8, 2005, three weeks before Hurricane Katrina. Louisiana SPCA www.la-sPCA.org.