



BOB CITRULLO AND  
ONE OF HIS PERSONAL  
RESCUES, DAISY.

# GIMMIE SHELTER

## BOB CITRULLO'S NEW HUMANE EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

BY DANA LISE SHAVIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN RAWLSTON

I'M SITTING IN THE EXTRAORDINARILY CLUTTERED OFFICE OF BOB CITRULLO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE CHATTANOOGA HUMANE EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY.

There are boxes of items for fundraising and donations, and piles of books and papers on tables everywhere. His desk looms in a far corner of the room beside an air-conditioning unit around which slivers of sunlight are visible, and through which the sounds of barking dogs can be heard. To the right of where I sit, leaning against the wall, is part of the frame of his office door, a stark reminder of the damage that was done when the shelter was broken into last July. In my lap rests one of his four dogs, a tiny, slightly sleepy, formerly feral Jack Russell terrier named Daisy.

*Despite the chaos, I get the feeling that things are completely under control.*

# BOB CITRULLO IS A FIXER.

HE'S THE GUY ANIMAL SHELTERS CALL ON FOR HELP WHEN THINGS HAVE GOTTEN REALLY BAD.

He got his start somewhat by accident at the Boggs Mountain Humane Shelter in Clayton, Georgia, when he went from board member to volunteer animal control officer to shelter director in a matter of just a few months. It was while working as there as the animal control officer that his eyes were opened to what was happening on the ground in animal rescue. Boggs Mountain was refusing to work with rescue groups, and was euthanizing 96 percent of the animals that came through its doors. When Citrullo took over, he lived at the shelter for six months. He supervised kennel operations, ministered to sick animals, and nurtured partnerships with rescue groups.

By the time he left, the kill rate was down to 32 percent.

By the time HES in Chattanooga called him, the organization was "circling the drain," Citrullo says in a slightly Midwestern-sounding accent. HES had an intake rate of 5,000 animals a year, and was fielding another 5,000 calls a year regarding animal problems in the community. There were only 16 employees on the shelter floor working to care for up to 500 animals, and HES had to take out a line of credit to pay them. The building was in disrepair and getting worse. And because of the financial crisis, they were no longer bolstering vaccines

(the term for keeping up with the most recent vaccinations for ever-evolving strains of disease). Word on the street was that HES' animals were "always full of worms."

Citrullo arrived with a plan. His first order of business was to get more money from the county: \$225,000 more in appropriations, to be exact. This increased Chattanooga's per capita animal welfare spending from \$3.83 to \$6; significantly better, though Chattanooga still spends less than the national average of \$8 per person. Advertising and outreach would educate the



CITRULLO POINTS OUT BUILDING UPGRADES.

# #1

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NEW DOORS AND HINGES WERE RECENTLY ADDED TO THIS SECTION OF THE KENNEL WHERE HEIDI WAITS FOR ADOPTION.

community about what HES does, he decided, which would encourage people to donate. With increased donations, HES could offer better health care, which would allow the nonprofit to adopt out more animals, which would lower the euthanasia rate. Ten more shelter workers would be added to the floor, and everyone would be paid out of the budget. And expanded, daily coverage from 8 a.m. until 7 p.m. for animal pickup, cruelty investigations, complaints and ordinance compliance means better care for both animals and the community.

"At times I've been called over-motivated," Citrullo says, laughing.

He admits that being a "shelter fixer" wasn't a goal of his to begin with. In fact, after retiring from a 25-year, high-pressure career in the military as an emergency room nurse in charge of a hospital unit, the 51-year-old father of five and grandfather of six says he had hoped to slow down. So he opened a grooming and boarding facility. Then he joined

# #2

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# #3

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the Boggs Mountain Animal Shelter board, and before long, Citrullo was out of the grooming and boarding business and into the animal life-saving business. Additional directorships followed, including in Toccoa, Georgia; Phoenix, Arizona; and Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"I have a passion for two things," he says. "Animals and the people who work with them. And I'm committed to never giving up on any of them."

I wanted to know from someone who has worked in the trenches of animal rescue, someone who has been in other cities and has seen what works and what doesn't, what he believes is driving the pet homelessness and overpopulation problem here in Chattanooga. Citrullo doesn't even have to think about this one: It's a lack of education. Without animal welfare education in the schools and the community, he says, there is ignorance about things like spay/neuter and responsible pet ownership. Unaltered animals running loose in the streets lead to unwanted litters and not enough homes. In addition, ignorance about things like vaccinating, appropriate living conditions, and socialization and training can lead to neglect (at times unintentional) and abuse.

Sadly, the education program was one of the first to get cut from HES' budget when money got tight. Which is also ironic, since education is technically HES' middle name. But Citrullo is on it. Getting the program up and running again is one of his primary goals — in the schools where it will get to the children, and out in the community as well. "How a city handles its animals tells a lot about that city," Citrullo says. "Often, companies look at the animal welfare program a city has in place when determining whether to bring

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# #4

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ANIMAL PATROL OFFICERS PLAN THEIR DAY AT THE HUMANE EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY.

their business there, because it tells them a lot about what that city will and won't do."

Also high on Citrullo's bucket list for HES is obtaining a new building for the shelter. The 12,000-square-foot building, originally Chambliss Children's Home, was donated to HES in 1910, and although the organization occupies it rent-free, HES has to pay to maintain it. With limited funds, the building has fallen into disrepair. A feasibility study is currently underway to determine the viability of erecting a new building on a new site. Citrullo would like to see the shelter move out of the

city since the organization serves the county, but there must be easy access. In the meantime, HES is renovating a surgery room, which will allow for spay/neuter surgeries in-house, guaranteeing that no animal leaves the shelter unaltered.

The numbers are improving. The live release rate is now 80 percent (the national average is in the upper 40s) and the return rate is less than 5 percent. Sixteen animals were in foster homes when Citrullo arrived; now there are almost 130 in foster care, which is important because less crowding leads to healthier and less-stressed animals who are easier



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