

## Manager handles tough job with care

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Beth McPhee moved from Arlington to the Charlottesville area 15 years ago to escape the rat race.

But ever since, she's been surrounded by animals.

The 41-year-old Green County woman started out cleaning cages and handling laundry at the Charlottesville-Albemarle SPCA for \$4 an hour, before working her way up to shelter manager.

"My biggest thrill is matching the perfect animal with the perfect person," McPhee said, pointing to a picture on her desk of a little girl cradling a Chihuahua. "I get e-mails from the little girl's dog. How cute is that?"

When SPCA director Sally Mead died in 1989, McPhee stepped in as interim director until a new director was appointed, said Jenny Mead, a member of the SPCA's board of directors and Mead's daughter.

And when the shelter's directorship changed hands three more times in the following years, each time McPhee stepped in to run the show, Mead said.

"You'd think that in times of lack of leadership, for one reason or another, everything would grind to a halt," she said. "But that wasn't the case at all."

Dr. Bill Hay, owner of Airport Animal Clinic in Albemarle County, calls McPhee a "real advocate for the animals."

Working at a shelter, Hay points out, isn't just petting cute puppies or cuddling kittens.

"Sometimes it's not a happy situation," Hay said. "A lot of people are looking for puppies or kittens. Adult animals are the hardest to find homes for. There is definitely a lot of stress with that."

In one of the shelter's more difficult moments, a typical scenario might look like this, McPhee explained: "You could be working at the front desk and one person throws a basket full of kittens on the counter and says, 'You can drown 'em for all I care.'"

“Then you have another person screaming how animal control has picked up their dog and they don’t want to pay to get them out. And then you have the third person whose dog just died, and they want them cremated.”

“There is nothing more emotional for people than their pets,” she added.

Somehow, McPhee has managed not to let those moments tear at her emotions, Mead said.

McPhee admits, “You have to have the fortitude to not get upset, to remain calm in some pretty hairy situations.”

Her love of animals began early in her life.

Growing up in her mother’s suburban Frankfurt, Ky., home, seeing a diaper-clad lamb run past the dining room table was a common scene.

“My mom was totally into animals,” McPhee said.

When she was a teenager, her mother remarried a colonel in the German army and the family moved to Europe.

The family Collie, Bo, came along for the trip.

Bo, a neglected neighbor’s dog, marked the first of many strays McPhee had taken under her wing.

After returning to the states, working at the Navy Yard and for a variety of government contractors in the Washington area, she came to Charlottesville with her husband.

Today, she and her husband, Harold, have two dogs, a Welsh pony named Beauty and several cats.

Hay admires McPhee for her ability to keep an open mind.

“The worst part is having to euthanize animals that are adoptable,” he said. “If it means placing animals in foster care to help them through injury, those are things she wants to do.”

Mead considers McPhee one of the major forces behind the SPCA’s animal foster care program and efforts to get grant money for transporting animals to Northern Virginia for adoption.

“Space is always a consideration for the shelter,” Mead noted—a problem McPhee hopes the new shelter, slated to open in early 2004, will help remedy.

In McPhee's tiny office, posters of muscle-ripped punk-poet singer Henry Rollins, courtesy of her co-workers, litter the inside of a closet packed with employees' coats and backpacks.

The room often serves quadruple-duty as office, storage room, lunchroom and dog kennel.

McPhee descended to one knee and called the lone Jack Russell terrier mix timidly hiding in a crate in the corner of her office.

The nameless mutt slunk out and rested two paws on McPhee's thigh.

"Look at that tail go," she cooed, rubbing its head affectionately despite the canine's skin disorder.

The dog, she explained, has a psychosis that makes it think it has fleas. Patches of hair are missing from its back from unnecessary scratching.

"There are great emotional highs and lows in this job," she said. "The highs are what you are here for."