

The Few, the Proud, the Animal Control Officers

Pet lovers should send these local heroes roses—or buy them all a beer

BY CARRIE ALLAN

Human beings are capable of terrible cruelty, but also of amazing kindness. Animal control officers see the worst—and some of the best—daily, as they work to rescue animals, investigate cruelty, and help people learn to better care for their pets.

The animal control field has a long and interesting history (which you can read about in depth in the feature on p. 28). It hasn't always been the prettiest history, but over the past decades, the field has become far more professional, progressive, and humane.

Part of the change, some believe, has come from the increasing number of women in the field. What used to be an old boys club is more and more a coed vocation, and as more and more women have crept in, a gentler approach to people and animals has crept in with them.

Back in 1977, Janet Snyder—who'd trained and been certified as a vet tech—applied for an animal control job in Englewood, Colo. She became the first female animal control officer in the department. By the time she left nine years later,

five other women had been hired by other animal control departments in the area.

Now the director of outreach and training for the Urban Wildlife Program of The Humane Society of the United States, Snyder says that when she first started in the ACO job, her male colleagues in the police department—which oversaw animal control—had some trouble adjusting.

"Every day it was, 'How's your sex life?'" she recalls. "I heard it from the sergeants, the lieutenants, everyone. I think the only one who had the sense not to harass me was the chief of police." Over time, she says, she just learned to adjust: "I'd just turn it around on them and say, 'Fine—how's yours?'"

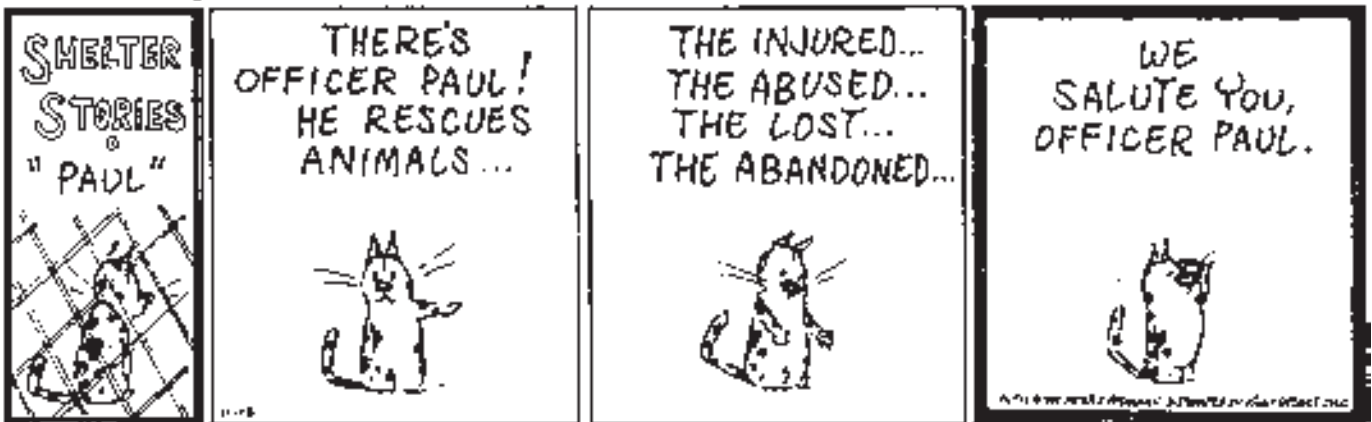
Women in the field had an effect, she says, on the way animal control did business, right down to lobbying for changes to the way the facility did euthanasia. At the time, it was performed with a high-altitude decompression chamber. "It was the public who pushed for the change to better methods," she says, "but since I and three of the other women had veterinary training, we were pushing, too."

In Charles County, Md., animal control chief Ed Tucker has watched the field grow and change. In his 21 years in the field, he says, he's watched his colleagues grow from dogcatchers into animal control officers, helping the community they serve.

"When I started it was, 'This is the law, and you've got to deal with it.' They just went out and took animals and brow-beat people," he says. "Those things have changed. If you don't teach people how to take care of [their dog], all they're going to do is go out and get another dog and put it in the same conditions. The educational side, and the public respect and respect from other law enforcement agencies ... it's tripled, quadrupled over the years."

It's a respect that's well-deserved. Thousands of animals owe their lives to ACOs and humane investigators, and it's worth taking a moment to join the kitty in the strip below in saying thank you. You guys—and by "guys," we mean gals, too—rock! **AS**

MUTTS by Patrick McDonnell



FROM PATRICK MCDONNELL'S BOOK, *SHELTER STORIES*