

ANIMAL CONTROL VS. ANIMAL RESCUE

Culture Clash Drives Fulton Shelter Dispute

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For 29 years, the Atlanta Humane Society has dispatched drivers across Fulton County to retrieve dogs and cats that no one loves.

The officers have carted their quarry to the county pound, a concrete bunker along a barren stretch of Marietta Boulevard, across from the county jail. There, thousands of animals have lived out the final three days of their lives. For Atlanta Humane follows a pragmatic county law: Nearly all animals that go unclaimed by their owners after 72 hours must die.

So it has been since 1974, when the nonprofit organization got the Fulton County contract to control the population of diseased or vicious animals. But now Atlanta Humane and the county are in an ugly divorce, and will part ways next month.

The breakup may have as much to do with changing attitudes as it does the Atlanta Humane Society. As Atlanta has evolved, it has attracted more people who want to "rescue" the doomed pets and put them into adoptive homes.

Animal control, as the name implies, is a utilitarian service for humans.

The resulting culture clash has degraded into name-calling and lawsuits, with Atlanta Humane and its executive director, Bill Garrett, in a cat fight with animal lovers who otherwise would seem to be natural allies.

"Those of us who do rescue do not like Bill Garrett because he's killed thousands of animals that did not need to be killed," said Connie Delinski, the president of a collie rescue group. "He has told me he'd rather kill a dog than rescue it." She said that over the 11 years her group has been approved to withdraw collies from the Fulton pound, animal control has handed over four.

The pound, using injections of the sedative sodium pentobarbital, killed 10,761 animals in 2001. That was 82 percent of the 13,102 animals impounded. The other 18 percent were wild animals released into nature, or they were lost pets collected by owners or transferred to Atlanta Humane or another adoption group. By comparison, Gwinnett and Cobb counties each took in slightly more animals than Fulton, yet killed about half of them. Gwinnett gave away three times more animals for adoption than Fulton; Cobb gave away six times as many as Fulton.

Robin Rawls, the vice president of the Clayton County Humane Society, said she has disliked Garrett since he chose to kill eight kittens and two cats last year instead of giving them to her.

"I had positive homes for those animals," Rawls said. "I was very angry."

Betty Crawford, an Atlanta woman who spends \$15,000 a year rescuing Old English sheepdogs and Bedlington terriers, said Garrett scoffs at people like her and hasn't kept up with the times.

Crawford, who serves on the Georgia Department of Agriculture's Companion Animal Advisory Board, said animal control officials across the country used to bristle at rescue groups but learned the value of cooperation. "Fulton County Animal Control is a dinosaur in a modern metropolitan area," she said.

Critical of critics

Garrett said he does give animals to legitimate rescue groups, though he said he finds the term "rescue" offensive, since it implies animals need to be saved from the pound. He said he doesn't recall the incident alleged by the Clayton County woman with the cats, and he denied saying he'd rather kill a dog than give it to a rescue group.

"Let's let them and myself get wired up to a polygraph," he said.

Garrett doesn't roll over for his critics. He and Atlanta Humane have sued two women—a Gwinnett County cat rescuer who called him "Mr. Kill" in an Internet chat group and a former Atlanta Humane employee who said in a TV newscast that things were "desperately wrong" there.

A portly fellow with ruddy cheeks and a silver mustache to match his silver hair, Garrett chats affably off the record. But he brought five co-workers to monitor a recent interview and trained a video camera on a reporter.

One of his colleagues dutifully scribbled on her notepad whenever the name of a critic was mentioned.

Glenn Summerlin, the past president of Atlanta Humane's board, has called the critics "zealots."

Fulton County, caught in the middle, rewrote its contract late last year. Atlanta Humane, feeling jilted, notified the county in December that it would stop running animal control March 20.

But the county already had decided to seek new bidders. The decision resulted from Atlanta Humane's poor service and its request for an increase in its \$2 million budget, said Susan Laccetti Meyers, a spokeswoman for Fulton County Commission Chairman Mike Kenn.

"We've had countless complaints about them for years," Kenn said in a written statement. "It's time to find a provider that not only operates an efficient system but treats dogs and cats in a more humane manner."

The new contract released last week mandates public adoption from the Fulton pound, and it requires cooperation with animal rescue groups, said James Fason, deputy director of Environment and Community Development for Fulton County.

Garrett said Atlanta Humane doesn't allow the public to adopt from the pound for liability reasons. Should an animal from there attack a human, Atlanta Humane could be subject to a costly lawsuit, he said. Rescue groups complain because they seek desirable breeds that rarely enter the Fulton pound, he said. If such animals do arrive and are in "adoptable" condition, Atlanta Humane takes them to its own kennel on Howell Mill Road, he said.

A respected advocate

Garrett started at Fulton Animal Control in 1974. He was 33 then, and had worked on an aircraft assembly line and owned a print shop. He displayed a flair for management, especially when it came to money, and by 1975 was promoted to director of Atlanta Humane. The organization prospered under his management, growing from an outfit that struggled to make payroll to one that reported net assets of \$20.2 million to the Internal Revenue Service in 2001.

Garrett has helped other animal advocates with training, and he has used his credibility as the leader of one of the largest Humane Society operations in the southeastern United States to lobby for important legislation, such as a Georgia law that elevated some animal cruelty crimes to felony level.

Carolyn Danese, president of the Humane Association of Georgia, lobbied for those laws with Garrett's help. Danese, who is a rescuer herself, said both Garrett and rescue groups do important work. "I just can't imagine why we can't get along better because all the people involved are good people," she said.

Garrett said some rescuers want to ruin his reputation. He said he was disgusted by the Mr. Kill quotation because the woman who wrote it did not know him. Garrett said he vomited the first time he had to kill an animal at the pound, though he "intellectually" accepts euthanasia as an ugly necessity. He does not own a pet, but has owned several in his lifetime. The last one, an 8-year-old cat named Cinnamon, died three years ago of cancer. Garrett keeps her ashes in an urn at home.

Garrett said he and Atlanta Humane sued to protect their reputations, which if tarnished could mean fewer contributions. He said he is not a defensive man, then added: "I hope I am offensive."

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