Volunteer Photographers Put Shelter Animals in Best Light

The challenge: Capture the stories of each dog, cat, rabbit and any other animal at the Animal Welfare League of Alexandria (AWLA).

The solution: A corps of professionally trained photographers volunteering their time to take individualized portraits of each animal in need.

Suggested strategy: Bring treats, props...and lots of patience.

Luckily for the AWLA, several professional photographers have answered the call, stopping by weekly with gear in tow to capture photographs of the shelter’s latest residents. Each has her own style and approach, but all share a goal: to provide a positive experience for each animal and create photographs that put the animal in their best light as they prepare for adoption. Along with their work in the shelter, the volunteer photographers also capture memorable moments at AWLA-related events, such as the Fun Dog Show, held each March, and the annual Howl-O-Ween costume competition.

Photographer Alison Satinoff, who owns Alison Lane Photography, occasionally spices up her photo portrait sessions with props — flowers, bowties for the animals to wear and beads and ornaments to strew around the kittens and rabbits. But it’s a session with a group of eight pet rats she recalls most vividly. “We placed them in a Barbie doll bathtub, about three at a time,” she said. “Fortunately, the rats’ foster caregiver was there to help, and the rats cooperated well. It actually looked super cute.”

These portraits, which are featured on the shelter website and on social media as well as in other shelter materials, require the assistance of specially trained shelter volunteers, who bring animals one by one into the shelter’s community room, where the photographers have set up professional lighting equipment. Each animal is posed in front of a 12-foot-tall white board, which can be intimidating until the photographer starts her song and dance. (cont. on page 3)
The friends and supporters of the AWLA know of our long-standing commitment to animals across the City of Alexandria. From returning lost animals to loving owners to providing humane education to school children, rescuing injured wildlife and our work with the city to prosecute those who have abused animals, the AWLA far exceeds our primary function of matching companion animals with families to call their own — and has done so for more than 70 years.

However, our work on behalf of animals extends beyond the boundaries of Alexandria. We work closely with other shelters across the region to provide assistance when they have a short-term crisis — like local flooding or an influx of animals from a hoarding situation — as well as longer-term support in areas where the need is far greater than in Alexandria. Our support transferring animals and providing supplies can mean the difference between life and death for dozens and even hundreds of animals in need.

One of the rescue groups with whom we work closely, Fur-get Me Not Rescue, based out of Galax, Va., recently won the Virginia Federation of Humane Societies’ Achievement Award for its amazing efforts to help its local shelter increase its live release rate from 34% to 74% over two years. This is an example of the difference made by focused collaboration across the Virginia community.

The AWLA is also active in supporting and promoting increased protection for animals in the state’s legislature. This past year, some critically important legislative actions have taken place to improve and even save the lives of Virginia animals. One example is SB1604, a bill that the AWLA supported, which raised the potential penalty for harming a dog or a cat from a misdemeanor to a Class 6 felony. This means that a companion animal no longer needs to die in order for their abuse or neglect to be charged as a felony.

Another bill supported by the AWLA is SB1025, which increases protections for dogs who spend a significant amount of time outdoors, requiring a greater level of weather-proofing for their shelter in both hot and cold conditions. The AWLA believes that all dogs should be afforded humane and comfortable indoor housing, and this new legislation will help the state’s humane officers enforce improved housing for dogs when these pets are outside, an important step toward this goal.

The work that the AWLA undertakes in advocacy and legislation may result in thousands of lives saved and in a significant reduction of animal suffering, and we will continue to work with local and state government to make Virginia a safer and more humane place for animals. With your continued support of the AWLA and animals across our community, we all can make the biggest difference to improve the lives of animals in need.
Say “Cheese” (or “Hot Dog”)

The AWLA’s skilled group of volunteer photographers offers these tips for capturing the best photographs of your pet:

- Exercise your pet before the session to eliminate counterproductive energy.
- Get down on the floor or on your pet’s eye level to view life from their perspective.
- For outdoor photographs, early morning and dusk provide the best lighting.
- Keep an eye out for objects in the background such as cars, road signs and trash on the ground that might detract from the photo’s center of attention — your pet.
- Avoid using flash — it turns pets’ eyes red or green.
- Dangle a toy from a stick above the camera so that the pet will look at the camera.
- Making noises, like barking or whistling, also captures pets’ attention.
- Patience is key — you may not get a great photograph the first time. Keep the photo session a short and positive experience, and your pet will eventually come around.
- And of course, treats, treats and more treats!

(continued from page 1)

“T’ll make weird noises or hold a hot dog over the camera to get their attention,” says photographer Sabrina Moore, owner of Dirty Paw Photography, who has offered her services to the shelter for the past four years.

Photographer Alison DeSilva, owner of DeSilva Studios, also uses treats to ignite action shots, sometimes throwing a hot dog into the air to get a dog to jump up and grab it. But the cats, she said, can be a bit more challenging to coax, and sometimes the biggest challenge is getting them to stay on the backdrop long enough to get a photo.

Each photographer brings her own individual style as well as expertise to her sessions. Moore will shoot animals in front of colored and patterned backdrops to help the shelter denote animals who have reached certain milestones. Castle and DeSilva excel at photo sessions outdoors as well as inside, when the shelter is telling a specific story or trying to capture a special moment. And with her use of creative props, Satinoff has captured some of the shelter’s most unique shots, used not only to highlight an adoptable animal but in other materials to show what a fun and engaging place the shelter can be.

Shooting with shelter animals is much harder than photographing people’s pets, says photographer Shelley Castle, who helped develop the AWLA’s photography program and has captured hundreds of the shelter’s animals with her camera over the years. Castle, who grew up on a Virginia horse farm and now runs Shelley Castle Photography, specializing in outdoor pet photography, says understanding animal behavior is critical to making them feel secure in a photo shoot. “The most important thing about photography is patience. I have to wait for animals who are scared to regain their composure and get comfortable…And then I might bark or whistle to get them to stop and look at me.” But the photographers also understand that the posed photos are not ideal for all animals and have captured turtles, shy cats and even fish in their own enclosures as well.

The photography team says the rewards outweigh the struggles of capturing the sometimes-fidgety animals in action. Satinoff recalls a day when she stopped by the shelter and was asked by a member of the public if she was one of the shelter’s photographers. The woman then proceeded to show her a picture of the dog she had adopted on seeing his photograph — and it was one that Satinoff had shot. “It makes it all worthwhile because that’s why I’m there,” she said.

“Some of the animals you fall in love with so much,” Castle said. “I feel the most rewarded when I can help a cat or dog who’s completely scared by being part of their learning experience for adoption. If I can stay calm and teach them that we’re here to help, it can prepare them for the kindness of a future family.”

2020 Photo Calendar Contest Starts June 1

You don’t have to be a professional for your pet to be famous! Enter our 2020 photo calendar contest in June to make your pet a star and win fun prizes, including a photo session with an AWLA pet photographer. Read more at AlexandriaAnimals.org/Calendar.
Tyler the bulldog mix was going downtown. Down to Old Town, to be specific. He had donned an “Adopt Me” vest, was fitted with a harness and leash and was setting off with an AWLA volunteer for a “foster field trip.”

The day out included stops at Union Street and Market Square, where Tyler checked out the fountain. He met plenty of people, many of whom paused to remark on his good looks, and the volunteer took the opportunity to promote him as a pet.

The romp through Old Town was a key stop on Tyler’s road to adoption. Along with meet-and-greet time, field trips provide animals with a change from the shelter environment, a chance to practice their social skills and also allow volunteers to gather information to pass along to potential adopters, said Maddie Bernstein, AWLA Community Programs Coordinator.

The energy expended on these adventures means that these pups will return to their kennels refreshed after a mentally and physically enriching day. Some of them even learn new skills. A Doberman mix called Emma balked at getting into the car to head out on her field trip, and she had to be coaxed up a ramp to the car with hot dogs. But when it came time to head back to the shelter, she hopped right into the car, Bernstein said, as if she’d been doing that her whole life.

Field trips are just one way the shelter’s 200 volunteers help Alexandria’s Animals find new homes. Many pets at the shelter need the special care and enrichment fosters can provide, said Foster Manager Arielle Wait, who has fostered more than 300 animals herself. Neonatal duty, for example, requires a specially trained corps of fosters, who take care of orphaned puppies and kittens too young to be adopted. These young animals need bottle-feeding as often as every two hours, along with assistance eliminating waste and maintaining body temperature.

Animals with significant veterinary needs may also benefit from extra TLC from fosters. Dogs undergoing treatment for heartworm may require months of recovery, and animals recovering from surgeries heal most successfully in a home environment. Animals with behavioral issues, especially cats overwhelmed by the bustle of the adoption floor, often benefit from a stay in a home, where they can learn to coexist with people and perhaps other pets — and be observed to collect valuable information for the shelter’s adoption staff.

“An animal’s behavior in the kennel is not always a good indicator of what kind of pet they might be,” Wait said. Fostering animals at the AWLA requires orientation and training sessions, Wait said. A foster’s interest should be in helping an animal, she said, which often means letting animals move on to new families after weeks or months together. All food and supplies for the foster animals are provided by the AWLA.

Some shelter animals enjoy a shorter-term foster experience in the form of foster “sleepovers” — overnight or multi-night stays at the homes of volunteers. Recent research on dogs at several shelters in the United States found that the animals’ cortisol levels — which can reflect stress — dropped significantly after only one night in a foster home. The research indicates that these sleepovers acted much like weekends do for people, allowing for rest and recharging. (Read more about the impact of foster sleepovers on page 6.)

At one point, foster volunteer Jodi Horton was caring for a mother cat and her five newborn kittens in her spare bathroom. All six eventually found new homes once they were ready for adoption. They were some of the more than 20 cats and kittens that Horton has fostered on behalf of the AWLA, often because they were too young for adoption. Her permanent family now consists of four cats, three of them former fosters. “Fostering just brings me so much joy,” Horton said. “I can’t say that I’ve quite figured it out though — sometimes I just have to keep them.”
Recognizing Our Supporters

Loving Influence of JoAn Tackett Still Shines on Alexandria’s Animals

For William E. Elwood of Alexandria, raising his family wouldn’t have been quite the same without the kind, compassionate influence of his neighbor, Betty Joan “JoAn” Tackett. Ms. Tackett and her mother lived in a historic Old Town home next door to the Elwood family and were among the first people the Elwoods met when they moved to the block in the early 1970s.

At that time JoAn Tackett had recently started work at the Pentagon after serving with the U.S. Armed Forces in Europe. She had brought back with her from Italy a black standard poodle called Miche, who she said had saved her life. She had been exploring a beach surrounded by steep cliffs in Sorrento when the tide rolled in and she was trapped. As she searched for a way out, the poodle appeared, almost by magic, and led her to a crevice in the rocks that she was able to scramble up.

Ms. Tackett, who died in 2017, left a generous bequest to the AWLA in honor of the dog who saved her life and the others who came after him. A lifelong animal lover, Ms. Tackett always tried to help lost animals, Elwood said, and was greatly distressed when hearing stories of animal cruelty. “She actually helped us get our first pet,” he recalled. “It was a miniature schnauzer found just wandering around, and after no one claimed her at the shelter, she became part of our family.”

Over the years Ms. Tackett welcomed a series of black poodles into her home — and introduced them to Old Town. Elwood remembers her placing a bow around the dogs’ necks and walking them around the town, stopping at restaurants that catered to canines and drawing admiration from residents and tourists alike.

Ms. Tackett and the Elwoods became very close — Ms. Tackett was like a member of the family — and she was chosen as godmother to both Elwood’s son and daughter, a role she loved. They would all spend Thanksgivings and Christmases together, even after the Elwoods moved to a house in the Belle Haven region of Northern Virginia. “She was a delight to converse with because you never knew what she was into. She was very intellectual and loved ballet, reading, art and museums, and she sang in the St. Paul’s Episcopal Church choir,” he said.

When Elwood now thinks of his friend JoAn, a comforting picture often comes to mind: He sees her sitting in her favorite reading chair in her Cameron Street living room, lit by sunlight and a nearby fireplace. At her feet, her dog rests in his bed. “It’s a classic portrait of dog lover and dog,” Elwood said.

If you would like information on making a bequest to the AWLA as part of your will, please contact us at legacy@alexandriaanimals.org.

St. Paddy’s Day Smiles and Spirit

Festive pups, wagging tails and smiles all around can only mean one thing—the AWLA’s annual Fun Dog Show! In March, pups in all their festive finery filled Old Town’s Market Square to wow the audience with their St. Patrick’s spirit or cheer on their favorite contestants from the crowd. The Fun Dog Show once again kicked off the Ballyshaners’ Old Town St. Patrick’s Day Parade, and this spring’s show brought together dogs of all shapes and sizes — and their people — for a morning of fun.

A dog’s size does not limit his creativity, as Duke the Rocket Dog, winner of Most Creative Costume, showed with his astronaut outfit (complete with a warm and cozy rocket ship). Winslow, who was awarded “Most St. Paddy’s Spirit,” navigated a crowded field with grace, pulling a cart full of cheer and a pot full of gold onto the stage with the help of his leprechaun companion. And however much you may resemble your pet, Best Human/Canine Look-Alike winners Emily and pup Lucy showed the crowd what a difference pigtails and a little face paint can make!

Thank you to everyone who attended and participated in this year’s show, and a special congratulations to our winners!
Looking at the Whole Dog

Whole Dogz is more than just a name for business owner Patrick Kenkel and his business manager (and mother) Mary Kenkel. “Patrick's goal really is to treat the whole dog,” says Mary. “From making sure the cleaning products we use are pet-friendly, to providing all-natural food and supplements and offering dogs fun, healthy play, we look at all aspects of how to give these dogs the fullest experience.”

Patrick has been helping shelter dogs since his college days in California, volunteering at the local shelter in Santa Cruz. When the Kenkels opened Whole Dogz daycare and boarding facility in 2014, right down the street from the AWLA, it was a perfect match. Shortly after they opened, Patrick reached out to see how they might volunteer their services to help shelter dogs. “Working with the community and helping dogs in need...it's near and dear to his heart,” Mary recalls. Shortly after Patrick made that offer, Whole Dogz boarded AWLA resident Oreo, a 3-year-old female Border Collie, for two weeks. Oreo was energetic but found the shelter environment to be overwhelming, and the opportunities she was given at Whole Dogz were just what the active pup needed.

“We have three different sets of playgroups for different-sized dogs,” Mary explained, “though they are based on temperament as much as size.” The groups venture outside in the morning and again in the afternoon, along with supervised doggie playtime indoors that include games like “Follow the Leader” and waiting for staff at the gate, enrichment activities like playing with bubbles and even storytime at the end of each session to help dogs calm down. Whole Dogz features an agility course, a sand pit for digging, and in the summer, an outdoor paddle pool. For dogs who board overnight, Whole Dogz has private suites on the upstairs level, and for dogs who experience separation anxiety or just don't like to sleep alone, there is the opportunity to sleep in the “Manager's Room” overnight with the staff member on duty.

Oreo's time at Whole Dogz helped embolden her so much that she was adopted shortly after she returned to the shelter, and she was just the first of many dogs assisted by Whole Dogz. Since 2014, Whole Dogz has fostered more than 30 dogs for the AWLA, including several litters of puppies. In winter 2018, Whole Dogz boarded the AWLA's “reindeer” puppies, a litter of nine shepherd mixes named after Santa's sleigh team. “Our staff is amazing when it comes to caring for one pup or a litter of puppies,” said Patrick. “They pay attention to not only their temperament but with the puppies, we know about any changes to their health every day. It's rewarding to be able to see once at-risk puppies be so well cared for and ready for a permanent home.” The reindeer puppies were popular with staff, and when they had grown old enough, one of the litter pups was even adopted by a Whole Dogz staff member. “He comes with his dad when he works now, and 'Myles' has already graduated to the medium dog playgroup,” says Mary.

Along with boarding, Whole Dogz has also offered emergency grooming services to several dogs who have come to the AWLA. “Whole Dogz has never turned us down when we've asked for them to groom a dog, even at a moment's notice. Some of the dogs who come to us haven't been groomed in years; the services they provide can truly be life-changing!” said AWLA Chief Operating Officer Stella Hanly. Whole Dogz has donated so much time to the AWLA over the past several years that the business was named one of our 2018 Vola Lawson Animal Champions.

Whole Dogz is currently fostering 6-year-old hound Dutch for the AWLA. Dutch prefers to be around people or other dogs, and the opportunity to hang out with Whole Dogz's staff and canine visitors helps him to feel confident and come out of his shell. “When dogs come from a pack, it can be hard for them to be alone, and I think that's how Dutch is feeling,” Mary suggests. Along with his time in a playgroup, they also play soothing music for Dutch and all the boarding pups at night to help relax them while in their suites. The Whole Dogz team thinks that Dutch is doing better in his suite on his own at night, though Mary admits, “He's a real sweetheart. I wouldn't be surprised if he sneaks his way into the Manager's Room at night already!”

For more information about Whole Dogz, visit wholedogz.com.

Helping Animals Afar AND Close to Home

A love of dogs, though unable to adopt one himself, was what brought Dave Fawcett to volunteer orientation at the AWLA two years ago. What brings him back each week is the sense of “great, positive energy” he said he feels when he is here. As he completed volunteer trainings and began working with pups in need of some special attention, Dave has spent time with many dogs, going on walks, giving belly rubs and trying to capture their goofiest moments on camera for potential adopters.

Dave met Steele, a five-year-old Boxer mix, after he was surrendered to the AWLA, having had difficulties adjusting to a home with young children. Since then, Dave has been fostering Steele on his days off of work, providing the dog with a relaxing “stay-cation” in his home, along with some extra attention to his training. With Dave's work schedule as a commercial airline pilot, he and Steele may spend a few days or weeks together at a time, but as soon as

For more information about Whole Dogz, visit wholedogz.com.
Pirate Takes the ‘Puppy Bowl’ — and Alexandria — by Storm!

When a bearded black pup named Pirate first stepped through the doors of the AWLA in August 2018, he had no idea the big things that were in store for him! At less than two months old and under 10 pounds, he was traveling on his own, with no mother to keep him company or teach him how to be a dog. Luckily, the AWLA’s amazing foster caregivers were on hand to help the young boy grow to be healthy and strong.

Even at that young age, Pirate had already been selected to be one of 93 canine competitors in the Puppy Bowl XV, which aired on the same day as the Super Bowl in February on Animal Planet. But along with teaching him to tackle and feint, the AWLA also had to teach him the more important life skills of socialization, training and manners.

And he certainly learned a lot! When Pirate set paw inside the Puppy Bowl studios in October 2018, he was ready and raring to go. He spent some time warming up with big dogs, getting rough and tumble with a St. Bernard and playing frisky with a husky. Later, he transferred these skills onto the field, scoring the first and second touchdowns of his quarter and helping to lead his canine colleagues on Team Ruff to Puppy Bowl championship. Along the way, this photogenic fellow also starred in one of the Bowl’s six “Pup Close and Personal” segments, focusing on his time with the AWLA and a special trip he enjoyed earlier in the fall aboard one of the Potomac Riverboat Company’s Canine Cruises. He was even one of the three canine models featured in the Puppy Bowl’s iconic Year 15 graphic.

Pirate was adopted shortly after he starred in the Puppy Bowl and now at nearly 45 pounds, his puppy days are nearly behind him. His adopter says he’s enjoying the life of a regular — if energetic — dog his age: “He’s either playing hardcore or he’s asleep. There’s no in between.” She also reports that he tuned in to watch himself in the Puppy Bowl, as did so many of us at the AWLA, who will always remember him as one of our MVPs — Most Valuable Pups! While his days of national fame may be past, Pirate is still excited to connect with his fans via social media, and you can follow his story on Instagram as @min_guk_ee.

The AWLA commends our Vola Lawson Animal Advocates (VoLAAs) for contributions made from January 1 through March 31, 2019. Thank you to the City of Alexandria, which allows us to continue to provide care, control and sheltering services to Alexandria’s Animals.

Vola Lawson Animal Advocates (VoLAAs) are recognized individuals and businesses who give support at the highest levels. The program includes several levels of recognition for monetary donations and volunteer hours as well as in-kind donations made fiscally. Animal Guardian — $25,000 or more financial or in-kind support or 5,000 volunteer hours; Animal Champion — $10,000 or more financial or in-kind support or 1,000 volunteer hours; Animal Friend — $5,000 or more financial or in-kind support or 500 volunteer hours; Animal Companion — $2,500 or more financial or in-kind support or 250 volunteer hours; and Animal Advocate — $1,000 or more or 100 volunteer hours.

For more information about becoming one of Alexandria’s Animal Advocates, contact development@alexandriaanimals.org.

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Animal Advocate — $1,000 or more or 100 volunteer hours.

Tribute Donations
Thank you to everyone who donated in memory or honor of a loved one between January 1 and March 31, 2019. Donations of $250+ are recognized here.

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Luna Becker by Peter Ramsberger
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