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The Left-Behind Victims

by: Kelly L. Stone

A survey conducted by the Humane Society of the United States indicates that 85% of women entering domestic violence shelters left a pet behind when they fled the abuser. The Department of Human Resources reports that over 400,000 domestic violence-related activities occurred in Georgia in 2003. That means approximately 340,000 animals in Georgia were impacted by family violence that year. What happened to them?

Emily Christie has an idea. As a young adult, Christie was forced to leave her cat in less than ideal conditions when escaping from an abusive boyfriend. Christie survived the ordeal, the cat did not. "No domestic violence shelter would let me bring her," Christie explains as she fights back tears. "Even when women have a place to go, their animals don't."

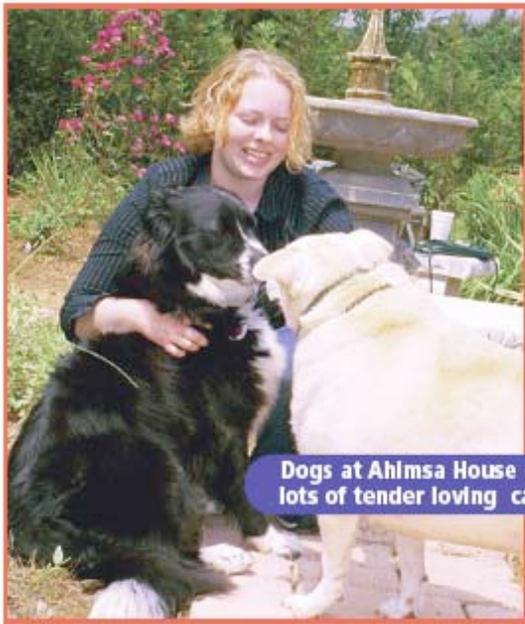


Rikki Osborne (left), Emily Christie (center), and Dr. Kelly Trogdon of Ahimsa House

Turning tragedy into triumph, Christie started Ahimsa House in 2004. Ahimsa, which means nonviolent in Sanskrit, is the only shelter in Georgia that exclusively takes in the pets of women fleeing domestic violence situations. Since opening the doors last June, Ahimsa House has been a safe haven for over 50 animals. The location of the shelter is kept confidential, but on-call staff are available to help get animals to safety 24-hours a day.

"Counselors in shelters practically burst into tears when they hear about us," says Vice-President Rikki Osborne. "They've had to tell so many women, 'I'm sorry, you can't bring your pet.' And so that woman will either not flee because she's not going to leave her pet behind, or she'll go alone and the animal's fate is left up to the abuser."

That dilemma is not uncommon. Abusing the pets is often how the batterer gains control over his human victim, explains Claudine Wilkins, a former prosecutor and volunteer with Georgia Legal Professionals for Animals. "Batterers often start by abusing the pets," Wilkins says. "They use them as an example of what will happen to the victim if they disobey."



Women can leave their pets in Ahimsa House for up to 65 days, although they can request an extension if necessary. Dr. Kelly Trogon, a veterinarian who consults with Ahimsa House, examines the animals for hints of abuse as well as provides routine medical services. "It's important to realize these women come from all socioeconomic backgrounds," she explains. "Some pets may already be vaccinated, or it may be a situation where the lady was so overwhelmed with everything else that she was unable to get the pet care."

Hopefully, once the pet is returned to the woman, the future is brighter for everyone. "One of the biggest things we focus on is breaking the cycle of violence," Osborne says. "We're trying to really play a part in that."

Ahimsa House can be found on the internet at www.ahimsahouse.org. The crisis line, which is reserved for emergencies only, is 404-452-6248. Donations are tax deductible, and can be made online at the website using PayPal. Donations can also be made by check and sent to Ahimsa House

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