

Unique shelter gives abuse victims a haven for their pets

By Antonia Hertwig-Benson
Staff Writer

After surviving two years of abuse from her husband, "Jane" decided she had enough. She called the nearest shelter for abused women but was unable to find shelter for her six-month-old shepherd mix puppy.

After making repeated phone calls to family and friends, Jane decided she had to give the puppy away to the local humane society, where its fate could not be predicted.

Though Jane's story is fiction, for many abused women whether they find a safe haven for their pets may be the critical choice between remaining in an abusive situation or giving up a lifelong friend.

Ahimsa House, a south Forsyth County animal shelter, is making the choice a little easier.

"We are the only shelter like this in the entire state of Georgia," said Emily Christie, a Forsyth County resident and the founder of Ahimsa House.

Christie, like the fictional character

"Jane," had to make the heart tugging decision to give up her cat when she left a violent home. However, seven years ago, Christie began planning the one-of-a-kind animal shelter.

"[Domestic violence] shelters have absolutely nowhere to shelter pets, however, we take the pets in and take care of them. We vaccinate, test for disease, spay and neuter," she said.

Christie said she named the crisis shelter Ahimsa because it translates to

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"nonviolence" in the language of the followers of the Indian nonviolent activist Mahatma Gandhi.

"We are basically a crisis shelter for animals. When we get a call from a shelter, we meet the woman, pick up the pets and keep them for up to 65 days. If they need care for more than 65 days, they can file an extension for up to 30 days," Christie said.

Since Ahimsa was granted its official nonprofit status in June, Christie said the shelter has provided care for approximately 35 animals ranging from Forsyth, Lumpkin and

Dawson Counties to Athens, Cartersville and as far away as Macon.

"We go just about anywhere and everywhere to help out," she said.

However, according to Christie, not all of the animals are held at the clinic. Though the shelter keeps cats in a room with cat trees and cat walks, Christie said it tries to send all of the dogs to foster homes because of needed attention.

"Women staying in the shelter(s) can also visit with their pets on a regular basis. We also provide pictures of their pets for them."

After rebuilding their lives, victims of domestic abuse are reunited with their pets. The shelter sends the pets home with a small bag of food, litter and a toy, as well as new collars and tags.

"They [victims] are really thrilled to hear we exist," Christie said. "It's talked women into going to the shelter because we shelter the pets."

Besides Christie, members of the shelter board include Dr. Kelly Trogdon, a veterinarian from Forsyth County who does the vaccinations, and Rikki Osborne of Fulton County who helped with the development of Ahimsa House.

Christie said Dr. Tracy Land, another area veterinarian with Project Spay or Neuter in Forsyth County, performs almost all of the spay and neuters for the shelter.

For more information or to make donations to Ahimsa House, visit their Web site at www.ahimsahouse.org.



Photo/Submitted

Caesar is one of the 35 pets who found shelter at Ahimsa House.