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Rescuing Harvey's Pets

By *Sophie Braccini*

Leanne Taylor and Liesl Peterson in the Houston pet shelter. Photos provided

When Liesl Peterson started seeing rescue operations in Houston on TV, her veterinarian eye immediately noticed that most people did not have pets with them. The realization was enough to send her searching for ways to go to Houston and support rescue operations there, as the pets would be in need of rescue as well.

A 1988 Campolindo High School graduate, Peterson is the daughter of Bobbie Preston, Moraga's 2016 Citizen of the Year, and was raised with a focus on community service. She will be at her mother's home on Sept. 24 to help raise money for the Habitat for Humanity hurricane relief fund.

Peterson and her friend, Leanne Taylor, are both veterinarians in San Ramon. They decided to leave for Houston right after work on Thursday, Sept. 7. They arrived in Houston Friday morning, and were directed to a pop-up shelter in an abandoned grocery store. She says that there were at least 300 animals there when they arrived at 9 a.m., and 500 by the time they left on Saturday evening.

"It was more than I expected," she said, adding that she was glad she went.

On site, she and her friend endlessly worked assessing the health of the cats and dogs arriving in the shelter.

"There was no veterinary oversight, so six volunteer vets and a handful of techs set up and just started vaccinating as fast as we could," she explained. The vets separated animals into obvious contagious groups like kennel cough, ringworm, cat upper respiratory; severe medical needs like severe bite wounds, or nursing moms; and clearly aggressive pets. She added that the pets were much calmer overall than would have been expected. "They are less emotional and more adaptable than one might think," she said.

The pets were either transfers from other animal shelters that had been there for a long time to make room at that shelter, or owner surrenders that just showed up, or people dropping off strays that were lost in the aftermath of the hurricane.

Peterson found that the organization was better than during Hurricane Katrina, but she noticed that there were no government resources, American Red Cross or FEMA representatives present, just random volunteers.

Peterson and Taylor had connected with the Austin Pets Alive group, which organized the shelter where they worked and other pet rescue operations in Houston. Peterson is a small animal vet, but going to Houston was the first time she was involved with an emergency operation and she said that it clearly took her out of her comfort zone. She felt so useful, however, that she is trying to organize her schedule and family duties to be able to go back again. She is sure that the needs are still big.

She described how difficult the conditions were, with no bathrooms (a few portable restrooms), no running water and a mountain of trash just outside the front door that was at least 20 feet long, 8 feet high and 6 feet wide, but she shared how heartwarming it was to witness when someone came to the shelter and was reunited with her two dogs that had fled and stayed together.

Peterson will be at her mother and stepfather's home in Moraga on Sept. 24 to tell her story and support Preston's fundraising event, which will benefit the Habitat for Humanity East Bay Silicon Valley Hurricane Relief Fund.

The Wine, Heirloom tomato, and cheese tasting is \$25 per person with wine donated by members of the Lamorinda Wine Growers Association, and organic heirloom tomatoes donated by Moraga Gardens Farm. Preston says that Habitat for Humanity has a long history of efficient, effective rebuilding after natural disasters with over 30 years of experience in community-based development.

For information about the hurricane relief fund, visit <https://give.habitatsv.org/Hurricane-Relief>.

Registration for the event can be done at the door, or online. The donation is tax deductible. To RSVP, email Preston at moragamama.bp@gmail.com.



Liesl Peterson takes a look at a stray dog someone brought to the Houston shelter.

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