

Whisker warriors

Meet the heroes of our animal shelters, who dedicate their careers, or their free time, to giving homeless cats and dogs a new lease on life.

Words **MONIQUE BUTTERWORTH**

AUSTRALIANS ARE A PET-LOVING bunch, with an estimated 28.7 million pets across the nation, most of them cats and dogs. And the majority of over 50s prefer to find their animal companions from a rescue shelter, according to research from Australian Seniors (see page 50).

With animal adoption clearly so close to our hearts, who are the heroes helping to make it happen? Carers, shelter workers, adoption coordinators, animal welfare officers, veterinary and event staff all play a key role, with paid employees and volunteers spending thousands of hours each year making a real difference in the lives of animals.

Melissa Penn, managing director of Sydney Dogs and Cats Home and president of CANA (Companion Animal Network Australia) started her journey more than 24 years ago as a supporter and volunteer. "Seeing lost 'babies' go home to their families, abandoned babies find new homes and neglected babies repaired and given a new chance at life and love – the positive impact we have on so many little lives is truly heartwarming," she says.

And it's not just about the animals. Melissa says the amazing human stories are equally gratifying. "It truly gives me purpose and fulfilment in doing my role." There are also many challenges. "We have difficult situations and lack of funding to navigate while trying to save and care for the animals who need us."

Around 200 volunteers contribute over 7,000 hours each year at the Sydney Dogs and Cats Home, helping out with day-to-day support and foster caring from their own homes. "Anyone can become a volunteer and there are so many different ways to be involved. We try to tailor the volunteering experience to suit the volunteer and their skills," says Melissa.

"We have a full spectrum of volunteers and diverse ages from 18-70. Some volunteers come every week, some monthly – some just do what they can, when they can. Everyone has a different story and background in life, and it's a real sense of acceptance and community when people join us."

Dr Ann-Margret Withers, veterinarian and senior manager of the RSPCA NSW Outreach, Education and Crisis Support Programs, says the type of work she does really appeals to her. "I found my niche doing desexing programs in rural communities, supporting low-income owners to have access to this service for their animals.

"This led me to our fledgling First Nations programs in north-west NSW, and I became the veterinary support for our Crisis Support Programs, ensuring people and animals stay together while experiencing domestic violence, homelessness, mental health or social isolation in older people.

"I think I have the most rewarding vet job possible. I am supported by an incredible team who are just as passionate about the work as I am."

Free community outreach work such as RSPCA's >



Nerida Atkin,
feline services
manager at the Cat
Protection Society
of NSW, takes care
of kitten Freddy.



MELISSA PENN
Sydney Dogs and Cats Home



DR ANN-MARGRET WITHERS
RSPCA vet

Healthy Pet Days also relies on vet industry staff volunteers. “We usually have one or two volunteer vets alongside two RSPCA NSW vets, plus an equal number of vet nurses and handlers. We do at least 20 of these events annually.”

Nerida Atkin, feline services manager at the Cat Protection Society of NSW, makes sure all the cats and kittens in care are looked after in a nurturing way while they wait for their forever homes. “The feline services team are responsible for providing health, welfare and behaviour advice to cat parents and those who may need assistance,” explains Nerida. “I am always looking at the current trends in cat care, behaviour and health, ensuring our advice is up-to-date and accurate.”

Nerida says all her staff and volunteers are Fear Free trained, which ensures their feline residents are living in an environment that is as stress free as possible.

Having fostered around 300 kittens in the two decades she has been with the

Society, Nerida, a qualified vet nurse and feline behaviourist, has worked in most of the roles as well. “I can appreciate all aspects of what we do and why we do it. I wish I could say attitudes have changed in the 21 years I have been with Cat Protection but sadly I don’t think they have. Educating people on what a responsible pet parent needs to be is always important and will always be needed.”

The Society has around 50 foster carers volunteering their time to look after kittens that are not yet ready to be adopted and another 100 volunteers helping out at the adoption centre, cleaning, feeding and socialising the cats and kittens while they wait for their new home. “We usually have four volunteers per day, seven days a week.” ●



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BY THE NUMBERS: PET RESCUE

THE AUSTRALIAN SENIORS SERIES: FOR THE LOVE OF PETS
REPORT 2024 FINDS...

52%

of over 50s say a rescue shelter is their top choice to find a pet

24%

choose their pets from breeders

13%

inherit pets from friends or family



To read the full results of **The Australian Seniors Series: For the Love of Pets Report 2024**, go to seniors.com.au and search ‘Love of Pets’.

GET INVOLVED

While formal qualifications are beneficial, some roles may involve on-the-job training or private courses. Here are some of the positions available.

ADOPTION COORDINATORS

Assess suitability of potential adoptees, their homes and lifestyle before matching pets with their new humans.

ANIMAL SHELTER MANAGERS

Take responsibility for the daily operation of shelter activities, working closely with vets and behaviourists.

ANIMAL ATTENDANTS

Perform the daily tasks needed to maintain the health and welfare of the animals, such as cleaning, feeding, medicating, exercising, bathing, grooming and maintaining records.

ANIMAL WELFARE OFFICERS

Are tasked with investigating animal cruelty reports, leading rescue operations and safeguarding compliance with animal welfare laws.

VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

Are responsible for the day-to-day management and supervision of the shelter’s volunteer programs.

VOLUNTEERS

Can offer their time in foster care, as a kennel or cattery assistant, gardening or maintenance, admin work or raising money and awareness.

VETERINARY STAFF

Provide medical treatment when required and nurture animals until they find their forever home.

