

Keep us Together

Santa Fe helps the homeless care for their pets through the winter



Deborah Douglass has had official therapy dog Peanut, left, since before she lost her home. She adopted 19-year-old Honey Bear last year from a homeless man who could no longer care for her.

The old adage, “home is where the heart is,” likely calls to mind frilly pillow cases your grandma bought at Hobby Lobby. But there’s absolutely nothing frilly about Jessie-Ray Romo, a burly, weather-beaten man with neck tattoos and piercings, his unwashed hair matted back into a ponytail. As he panhandles on at the corner of St. Francis Drive and Cerrillos Road with his 80-pound Rottweiler/pit bull mix Corazón, the two make an intimidating looking pair.

Yet, this hard man melts instantly into shy smiles as he talks about his dog, who lovingly licks his face when she hears her name.

In many cities, the streets can become a deathtrap for homeless people and their companion animals in winter when temperatures drop below freezing. Few shelters have the capacity to house pets, and food and veterinary care are often more than someone living on the streets can afford.

But in Santa Fe, a network of organizations is quietly working behind the scenes to make sure homeless people and their pets get care. Karen Cain, the founder of the Street Homeless Animal Project, holds the network together.

It’s been 21 years since Cain started passing out pet food and supplies as well as raising funds for veterinary care for homeless pets, and 10 years since her organization became an official 501(c)3. Cain says people like Romo keep her going.

“For many of these folks, the animal is the only family they have,” Cain says. “That’s why we do everything we possibly can to keep a person united with their companion—no matter what it takes.”

Romo says he’s an Iraq war veteran who returned from deployment with PTSD. As his condition worsened, he and his wife divorced, he lost his job, and eventually ended up on the streets. Now, he says, Corazón is all he has.

"I never thought I could love or trust anyone ever again after everything I'd seen and losing my family, but Corazón, she saved me," he says, blushing. "I know it's cheesy, but as long as I have Corazón, I'm home, and I wouldn't trade her for anything in the world, not even a mailbox with my name on it and a pair of front door keys."

Romo, who traveled to Santa Fe from Colorado, says he often spends freezing nights in the open rather than risk getting separated from his dog at shelters in other cities that don't accept pets. "This is a real concern in the winter," says Joe Jordan-Berenis, the executive director of Pete's Place, the only shelter in Santa Fe that offers a kennel for pets to stay overnight. "If people don't want to seek shelter because of their pet, they could die."

Deborah Douglass lives at Pete's nearly year-round with her two Chihuahuas, Peanut and Honey Bear.

"I have bipolar disorder and sometimes I have suicidal tendencies," she tells SFR. "These little guys, they give me a reason to get up every morning."

With the two little dogs happily snuggled into her chest, she says, "They keep me calm. They are my emotional support. They are my family, and honestly, they've saved my life."

Douglass has gone to Street Homeless Animal Project for supplies for her pups such as winter sweaters and leashes. Two other women at the shelter approach SFR to say the group has also helped them with veterinary expenses.

Cain says when SHAP started, Smith's was the only veterinary clinic willing to work with the homeless population. Now, the vet is an official partner with the organization. Other nonprofits in the network include the Santa Fe Youth Shelters and Family Services.

Of the 200-300 people served each month, Cain says most of Street Homeless Animal Project's clients are actually young people. Part of the problem, perhaps, is that the youth cold weather shelter, which opens on Dec. 1, and the youth emergency shelter, do not take pets, says Shelly Felt, the executive director of the youth shelters program.

"It is an issue that's quite significant in housing young people," she says, because just like homeless adults, many young people would rather risk it on the streets than abandon their companion animal.

For those teetering on the edge of homelessness, such as individuals staying at the Esperanza Shelter for women and children fleeing abuse, the Santa Fe Animal Shelter also offers support and will house pets for up to 90 days. Cain says, "Helping people stay united with the animal members of their family is a community effort."