

Homeless, neglected animals throughout the world get needed help through Animal Kind International

Global good deeds

By Ben Swan | For The New Mexican

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Photo by: Courtesy photo

They call it The Haven, and as Uganda's only animal shelter, it truly has become a place of refuge for the country's homeless and neglected dogs and cats.

Every companion animal has a story at The Haven, and thanks to a global network of animal lovers, they survive and thrive. Animals like Hope — a brown dog paralyzed after being hit by a taxi in a Kampala slum — and her kennelmate Nelson — a dog that gets around just fine on two legs. One paw was chopped off at the knee, likely by a machete, while the rear leg is deformed, perhaps by genetics or an injury.

The two dogs enjoy each other's company, said Karen Menczer, who visited the animal shelter in July while in the country as part of her work for USAID.

"Nelson has been through a lot," said Menczer. "But he is a peace-loving and kind dog. He and Hope are very good buddies."

Menczer, a Jemez Springs resident, is the founder of the nonprofit Animal Kind International, a website that brings together people who want to support animal welfare throughout the world. Aside from Uganda, AKI supports animal-welfare groups in Ghana, Namibia, Botswana, Southern Sudan, Honduras, Jamaica, Armenia and Bosnia.

Many of the countries are places that Menczer and her husband, Ron Stryker, visited while working overseas in some of the world's poorest places. Both have spent their careers working to improve the lives of people in developing countries, but could not neglect the lives of animals they saw living in horrid conditions. Their off-duty hours were devoted to humane treatment of animals, and many animals returned with them to Jemez

Springs.

While Stryker has retired from foreign service, Menczer continues to work for USAID, focusing on biodiversity, natural resources and conservation issues. Menczer recently returned from a stint in Haiti, where she said she was surprised at the lack of animal-welfare work — fundamental things like spaying and neutering — in the wealthier and relatively unharmed parts of the earthquake-torn country.

Many of the places AKI supports are dependent on one person, or a handful of volunteers. Menczer said she worries about animal-welfare groups in places like Namibia, where she recently learned a group will likely close its doors because of lack of funding and dwindling volunteer support.

The Uganda shelter, founded by the Uganda Society for the Protection and Care of Animals in 1998, however, is a thriving organization that is working to change the plight of animals in the country's largest city through spaying and neutering, veterinary treatment and humane education. The group hopes to move to a larger space, where the staff can care for an ever-growing pack of critters.

The shelter has doubled the number of dogs it cares for to 80. "All of them are wonderful — not a difficult, bad one in the bunch," she said. "A few are shy, many have been through difficult times, but they are all happy and well-cared for now."

Menczer, through a quirk of fate, happened to be in Uganda at the same time as two longtime AKI supporters, Sarah Schmidt from Washington state, and Nicole Divitcoff of Toronto.

It was the first time the Menczer had met the AKI supporters. "It was very exciting," she said, adding that the two enjoyed their visit at The Haven. "Ugandans are such nice, welcoming people."

Schmidt, who named Hope's kennelmate after Nelson Mandela, the former South African president who fought against that country's apartheid practices, presented an award from California's Central Valley Coalition and AKI in honor of the staff and volunteers.

Divitcoff brought with her duffle bags of needed veterinary supplies and toys, along with money she raised through a mass e-mail to friends and family. Divitcoff, a teacher's assistant, also has raised funds for other AKI-supported groups through a garage sale, with proceeds benefiting Helping Hands for Hounds of Honduras and Jamaica's Community Animal Welfare.

The \$320 raised, split between both groups, covers about two weeks of dog and cat food for low-income families and stray animals in Jamaica and altering at least five dogs in Honduras.

A little money goes a long way for the groups, Menczer said, and that kind of individual fundraising is something AKI hopes to cultivate. Other supporters have asked that donations be sent to AKI instead of holiday or birthday gifts and at least two people hope to raise money through a marathon and other running events.

Menczer would like to encourage school groups and other student organizations to take on the challenge of raising funds to help the world's animals.

Many of AKI supporters are inspired by the stories they read on the website about the animals being cared for in difficult circumstances. Schmidt, the Washington state resident, worked to secure a wheelchair for Hope

and paid for its shipping last summer.

During her African visit, Schmidt interviewed Jukko William, the taxi driver who took care of Hope and urged others not to "throw her out." Schmidt, who is writing a book for Ugandan children about Hope, interviewed William at taxi park and at The Haven, where the driver and dog were reunited.

Through Schmidt's contributions, one staff member, Mary, cares for Hope and walks her every day, along with giving other animals needed attention. It's the first time there is someone working directly with the dogs, Menczer said, helping new dogs get adjusted and easing the anxiety of shy dogs.

Divitcoff, the Toronto resident, said in a blog posting that seeing all the adoptable cats and dogs at The Haven was heartwarming. While the staff acknowledged the shelter is over double its capacity, members told her they didn't have the heart to euthanize healthy animals.

"Knowing that there are more homeless animals on the streets of Kampala waiting to be rescued from abuse, starvation and dangerous roads has made me committed to helping the shelter even further," she wrote.

GLOBAL OUTREACH

To learn more about Animal Kind International's work and about each organization it supports, visit the website at www.animal-kind.org.