

Helping hands for animals

Woman works to better the lives of animal companions in Honduras

By Ben Swan | For The New Mexican

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Photo by: Courtesy photo

Pilar Thorn keeps a handful of worn photos close to her at all times. Some of the dog-eared images are hard to look at: Large cancers growing on the breasts of mama dogs, gaping neck wounds on playful pups, hairless dogs whose skin appears thick and malformed.

But she follows up the frightening photos with images of the some of the same animals, happy and healthy after healing at her Honduras animal sanctuary.

Some of the animals couldn't survive their injuries, Thorn notes, but many have healed and have become loving animal companions. Dogs like Guapa, whose name means "pretty" in Spanish. The dog was anything but pretty when Thorn rescued her: Scaly and lumpy, the creature appeared to be nothing but skin and bones.

Thorn, a biologist by training, sees beyond the obvious when it comes to animals. After three months of antibiotics, love and healthy food, Guapa's fur grew back and she was adopted, becoming a trusting and loving pet.

"It's like Christmas presents," said Thorn, who was visiting New Mexico earlier this month. "You never know what's inside that package, and in some cases, horrible-looking packages. And then you find out."

Thorn's Helping Hands for Hounds of Honduras is the Central American country's only animal shelter. Based in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, Thorn cares for about 22 dogs, five cats and several wild birds — all looking for forever homes.

A native of California, Thorn moved to the impoverished nation more than 40 years ago as a volunteer for the Peace Corps. She was hoping to be placed in Africa or Asia.

"Living in California, we were right next door to Tijuana," she said. "So I wanted to go someplace different. But they sent me to Honduras."

She finished her biology degree through a special program of the Peace Corps and eventually joined the

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras, where she taught for 40 years before retiring last year. Both her children, who have since settled in the United States, were born in Honduras.

Life isn't easy for many Hondurans, but animal companions face an even tougher existence. Dogs and cats are routinely beaten, or ignored to starvation. It's something that bothered Thorn the moment she stepped foot in the country.

"You'll see people walking down the street and there will be a dog sleeping on the street and they'll go and kick it," she said. "I'd always carry a bag of pet food in my car; I felt at least they could have one last meal."

Outright animal cruelty is commonplace in Honduras, said Karen Menczer, a Jemez Springs resident who runs Animal-Kind International, the website-based nonprofit that supports Thorn's sanctuary and about a dozen animal-welfare groups in nine poor countries. Menczer met Thorn while she was worked briefly in Honduras for USAID, and has helped support the animal-welfare group ever since.

"In Africa, and even places like Uganda, there's much more of a live-and-let live kind of thing," Menczer said. "If they see a dog is hungry, they'll throw them a piece of bread or at least some food. I've been with people who are well-educated in Honduras and if a starving dog comes, they'll just ignore them or kick them away. I don't understand it."

Menczer calls Thorn's work amazing, considering the circumstances. Thorn's the type of person who will drop everything and do anything in their power to save an animal.

"Some people might get an e-mail about a dog and think, 'well, there are a lot of dogs; I can't save them all,'" Menczer said. "Not her. She will never say that. She will never let a dog or cat go."

Thorn founded her animal sanctuary about 15 years ago, after her children left home. She does hands-on rescuing, feeding street dogs and cats, treating them for parasites and vaccinating them against diseases and getting them spayed or neutered. She's well known in her community, and has become the point person for injured or neglected animals.

She'll take hurt critters to veterinarians or treat them at home. While not a trained veterinarian, Thorn has held courses on first-aid for animals and does emergency veterinary care. Her background as a biologist and past work in a convalescent home helps.

"Sometimes they'll come in with a machete wound on the whole side of their mouth," Thorn said. "I have to sew them up. A lot of times, there's no one around."

There are fewer than 16 veterinarians in the capital city, she said, which is home to more than 1 million people. And there are only about three other known animal-welfare groups in the entire country — none of which provide direct care to animals.

Thorn works hard to change the mentality of Hondurans when it comes to animals. Some people, many who lived here in the States, care about their companion animals, she said, and care for them. And there are some people who earn less than \$1 a day who treat their dogs better than those making \$100, she said.

"What little they have, they will split with the dogs. Then you have everything in between."

Many people stand by preconceived ideas about animals, Thorn said. Some won't spay or neuter their animals, believing it's better for the animal's health. Others say animals aren't Christian, so lack the ability to think or feel.

"I'll tell them, 'yes they do, they have the same nervous system,' " she said. "It's very unusual for Hondurans to pet animals."

Older and disabled animals are especially vulnerable, Thorn said. It's easy to adopt out puppies, but once they get older many people will neglect them.

Through example and education, Thorn works to expose people to a different reality. University students who help her treat animals say they find the work gratifying.

"They'll tell me they've never learned anything about animal feelings," Thorn said. "And that they've learned compassion for animals."

Animals teach us so much, said Thorn, who supports her sanctuary on her retirement funds. Once-vicious dogs become lapdogs once they know they are in a safe environment.

"It's incredible," she said. "How is it possible that these (creatures) can be so mistreated and still so loving?"

For more information about Helping Hands for Hounds of Honduras or other animal-welfare groups around the world, visit AKI's website at www.animal-kind.org. Donations are accepted at the site through PayPal or may be sent directly to AKI, P.O. Box 300, Jemez Springs, N.M. 87025.