

## Helping Dogs, Cats, and Birds in Honduras

### About Pilar Thorn

I was working in Honduras, when a colleague, who knew of my interest in animal welfare, told me that I should meet her neighbor. Pilar Thorn, an American ornithology professor, has been feeding and caring for dogs and cats on the streets of Tegucigalpa for over 30 years—and for the last 14 years, taking dogs, cats, and birds into her home for care.

I visited Pilar, and the rescue cats and dogs she was treating at her house. And since that night, about eight years ago, we have continued our conversation about how to improve life for dogs and cats and bring more attention and resources in support of her efforts in Honduras.

Throughout Tegucigalpa, Pilar goes about feeding dogs and cats that live on the street, and if they are approachable, treating them for parasites with Ivermectin, vaccinating, sterilizing, giving them love, and educating people on proper care. When a dog or cat is especially in need or in danger on the streets, she brings the animal home with her for more intensive care. Then she tries to find homes for the dogs, cats, and birds that she determines are adoptable—but only if she finds someone who she can be sure will provide proper care.

There are several animal welfare groups in Tegucigalpa, and Pilar has volunteered with most of them at some point. Now, she chooses to work independently for the most part, although she does collaborate when teamed efforts are needed to help animals (for example, on a specific campaign—like anti-poisoning—it is more useful to work as a team). Pilar finds that she can help more animals, and solve problems quicker when she works on her own—she gets frustrated by the slow pace and bureaucratic nature of many animal organizations. And by working independently rather than with one organization, she keeps cordial relationships with all groups. There are so many suffering animals on the Tegucigalpa streets, and Pilar is the only person who is out there, in the communities, helping these dogs and cats, talking directly to the people who live among these needy animals.

Having rescued so many animals over the years—over 1000, she now keeps around 20 dogs, several cats, and parrots at her house, the Nereida Montes de Oca Refuge.

On a personal note, Pilar is one of the hardest working animal welfare advocates, working in one of the toughest environments that I know. She is a university professor who uses all her influence and even has jeopardized her career for dogs, cats, and other animals.

### Dogs and Cats in Tegucigalpa

In Tegucigalpa, there is a constant threat that City government will use poison to try to control strays. The threat emerges, animal welfare groups band together to fight it, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. If successful, the threat is usually just postponed to a later date.

Most dogs and cats in Tegucigalpa are not sterilized, and since the majority is not confined, over-population is a huge problem. Dogs can be found digging in garbage piles, wandering the city's streets, slowly starving to death. It's common to see injured dogs as you drive around the city; they may have

been intentionally or accidentally hit by cars, had rocks thrown at them, or boiling water poured on them. Kindness to animals is not a widely held ideal among many Hondurans.

Most Hondurans keep dogs to warn them of thieves breaking into their homes or attacking them while they are working in their fields. It is rare for Hondurans to allow dogs into the house or pet them, and many do not even feed them. Of course, Pilar says, "There are exceptions. I have given two three-day courses to University students on first aid for animals, and this experience has given me some hope that things can change."

Cats usually come out at night and spend their time searching for food and avoiding dogs. It is rare for people to keep cats as pets, and they are almost never sterilized.

### **Pilar's Way Forward in Honduras**

Pilar recently captured the attention of many Hondurans. One of Tegucigalpa's daily newspapers, La Tribuna, published an article about Pilar's work, and since then she has been receiving emails from people about abandoned, dying, and mistreated dogs and cats, asking her to pick them up and help them. Also, after the article appeared, a Rottweiler mix was left at Pilar's house for her to care for. She is hoping that the attention focused on her by this article will bring renewed energy to her effort to start a shelter in Tegucigalpa.

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