

HOPE in a Land of War and Want

OVERCOMING DAUNTING OBSTACLES, AN HSI-SUPPORTED SHELTER

IN AFGHANISTAN PROVIDES SANCTUARY FOR ANIMALS IN NEED

by PAMELA CONSTABLE

It is just an old rented house with no sign on the front gate, outdoor pens full of yelping puppies, and indoor rooms full of snoozing cats. The water pump often breaks, and the power shuts off without notice. There is a refrigerator to keep vaccines cold and a woodstove to keep puppies and kittens warm. There is no fancy medical equipment or computer, just stacks of files with scribbled entries like “Brown dog with white feet, brought by storekeeper, high fever, won’t eat” or “Three puppies arrived in truck, very thirsty, driver doesn’t know name of American soldier who sent him.”

Yet this modest shelter and clinic is a small miracle in a harsh, war-ravaged society where people struggle to survive and pity is scant for the hungry and homeless creatures who wander the streets.

When I moved to Afghanistan in 2001, I was an international affairs writer who had lived in more than 30 countries. I’d fed stray animals from Argentina to India and found homes for the ones I could. Afghanistan was the first place I’d lived where there were no vets, no clinics, no shelters, not even a store that carried pet food.

It was also the first society I had encountered with such widespread hostility toward dogs. In Afghan culture, dogs are routinely shunned as dirty, diseased, and dangerous. Children are taught to throw stones at them, and even educated adults repeat the common proverb that angels will not enter a home with a dog inside.

After a short time in Kabul, I discreetly began taking hamburgers



to garbage dumps where hungry dogs and cats gathered each night. I saved a few of these strays, stashing them in my office until I could find a more permanent solution. But without a shelter, medicine, or veterinary skills, there was little I could do for homeless cats with crushed legs, puppies with sawed-off ears, dogs suffering from chronic mange, or desperate mothers trying to raise litters in the gutter.

Finally, in 2004, I rented a house on the outskirts of the capital, had a carpenter build pens and cages, and hired an Afghan veterinarian from a Western facility that trained imported military shepherds to sniff out land mines. I named the shelter Tigger House after a determined little cat I had once saved.



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 A WARM, DRY PLACE TO SLEEP—
 AND FREEDOM FROM FEAR.

Our first resident was Foxy, a dog my driver and I spotted being dragged along the street by a man with a chain. I jumped out and bought her for \$20. She became the shelter's self-appointed watch dog, and to this day she lives in a booth just inside the front gate, barking furiously when the doorbell rings and running up to greet old friends.

Refugee Resettlement

Every day, Tigger House deals with logistical challenges that few other shelters face. With pet food hard to come by, all meals are cooked from scratch. Construction sand doubles as kitty litter. Every plastic airline crate has to be imported. But with help from generous donors and institutional partners like Humane Society International, Tigger House now has a well-stocked pharmacy, an operating room, and a local staff of 10. Over the years, hundreds of animals have found safety and healing within its gates.

Many of our patients have been hit by cars, sickened by eating garbage, or mutilated by abuse. Staff members treat them

for worms, ticks, mange, eye infections, intestinal ailments, bites and kicks, and ears hacked off to make dogs fierce for fighting. We give each arriving animal a name, a bath, a hot meal, vaccinations, and a warm, dry place to sleep. Most important, we give them freedom from fear, often for the first time in their lives.

In addition to animals we find roaming the streets, we receive a steady stream of desperate emails from American soldiers and other Westerners posted at remote and dangerous outposts, describing how a scrappy little dog wandered into camp and became their best friend, a creature to love and comfort in a harsh and hostile place. Now the unit is being deployed to a new base, or a commanding officer has ordered them to get rid of the dog. The emails beg us to save their adopted mascots from being left behind to starve or suffer.

Clockwise from opposite page: In a tent colony of war-displaced families outside Kabul, a boy presents his puppy to the camera; Tigger House's assistant veterinarian administers eye medication to resident dogs; Shadow perches on a ledge in one of the shelter's two cat rooms.



We often pay cabbies and cargo truck drivers to venture into the war zone, rendezvous with soldiers outside camp gates at dawn, and race back to Kabul. We coordinate with military convoys and sympathetic helicopter pilots who

drop off terrified, queasy pups in wire cages and homemade wooden boxes. We provide these four-legged refugees with a secure sanctuary while working to ship them to the soldiers' homes back West.

These happy endings keep me going, and I like to think about dogs we were able to save: Charlie, a puppy who almost died from eating gravel. Smoke, a pup adopted by an injured soldier; we sent her to board near a U.S. military hospital so she could comfort him. Rascal, rescued from Afghan soldiers who were using him as a soccer ball. Mocha, who gave birth under fire and was in shock when she reached us. Aslan and Rufus; Snowball and Rex; Pepper and Patience; Whiskers and Lumpy—all now living as beloved family companions in places like Texas, New Jersey, and Toronto.





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Like many American soldiers serving in Afghanistan, Josh Roth (left) befriended a stray dog and wanted to give her a better life. After being treated for intestinal parasites at Tigger House, Nolah was flown to California for a joyful reunion with Roth. Tigger House is a “shining light” for soldiers who have bonded with animals in Afghanistan, says Humane Society International’s Kelly O’Meara, who serves on the board of the Afghan Stray Animal League.



Once in a while, though, we see a glimmer of compassion and hope for change. One

day in fall 2011, some Afghan shopkeepers hesitantly approached our assistant vet and told him there was an injured dog in a vacant lot. He found her lying there with a crushed leg and carried her back to the shelter. We named her Lola and sent her to Pakistan to have her leg amputated. Today, she is a happy, healthy three-legged dog living in New England. When I sent a photo from her new home, the assistant vet showed it to the astonished shopkeepers, and they blessed him.

I no longer live in Afghanistan, but every few months, I return to visit the shelter. I especially like to sit on the porch in the early morning. Outside, the first calls to prayer rise from the mosques and the first donkey carts clip-clop by on the way to market, but the clatter and stress of the day have not yet begun to intrude. Inside the shelter, a guard lights the stove to heat the animals’ breakfast of soup and bread, then checks the dog pens and cat rooms to make sure everyone is all right.

At these moments, I am filled with a sense of peace and satisfaction, of having helped at least a few creatures among the hundreds of thousands who are still out there, facing another day of scavenging for garbage, dodging kicks and stones, and trying to be invisible in the shadows. At Tigger House, the animals begin to wake and stir, looking forward to another day free from hunger and fear. ■

Finding Peace and Promise

What we cannot do, unfortunately, is change the way years of poverty and conflict, illiteracy and superstition have caused many Afghans to treat stray animals. When our staff tries to rescue injured dogs in the street, they are often ridiculed by passers-by. Western pet lovers are mocked as “dog washers,” an epithet capturing the tragic gulf of cultural misunderstanding that persists between many Afghans and their Western partners.



► **NOW LIVING** in Arlington, Va., writer Pamela Constable founded the Afghan Stray Animal League (afghanstrayanimals.org), a nonprofit organization that supports the Tigger House shelter.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JAVED HAMDARD; PAM CONSTABLE