

be good

# FurKids

BY ANNA FERGUSON

Samantha Shelton never went looking to become a hero. She never searched for a way to start a revolution. Nonetheless, she did as much, when the mission found her.

In the fall of 2001, Shelton looked out her kitchen window to find a mother cat leaving three kittens in her backyard. The act was yet another sign that a massive over-population of feral animals had overcome the region. Shelton was overcome with compassion and the urge to fix, not ignore, the issue. She gathered up the three kittens and tried to find a home for them, going so far as to offer a \$1,000 reward to anyone who would take the kittens in.

"I've always loved animals and been the type to be a caretaker. I just couldn't stand to see them put down," Shelton says. "But I had no idea from that all of this would happen."

Prior to that fateful October day more than eight years ago, Shelton was like most people. She had heard game show host Bob Baker's famed tagline, "Have your pet spayed or neutered." And she knew there was an issue with feral cat over-population, of some sort. But she had never spent much time actually recognizing the problem.

"Until the problem was literally placed on my doorstep, I hadn't really seen it," Shelton says. "It's not until it is really put in your face that you start to see it. Then, you really see what a huge problem this is."

Once Shelton was exposed to the concern, there was no turning back. Merely months after the kitten mission found her, she took the business savvy she had acquired from her nine-year career as a sports marketing manager for Turner Broadcasting and started her own organization, FurKids.

A non-profit, no-kill shelter, FurKids is a cage-free animal rescue that houses kittens, cats and the occasional pup or two. The rescue's headquarters, located in Gwinnett County, is the largest no-kill animal shelter in Georgia, housing some 200 cats, with more than 5,000 rescued since the organization started. As well, FurKids spays or neuter all of its in-takes to help end pet over-population, Shelton says.

A far cry from the standard animal shelter, FurKids is bright, energizing and warm, with the cats free to roam, climb and play in their designated rooms throughout the facility. Beyond housing and sterilizing these animals, FurKids also helps them find homes. Across Atlanta, PetSmart and two PETCO adoption centers operated by FurKids, as well as dozens volunteer foster homes.

"According to Stopping Pet Overpopulation Together, more than 100,000 dogs and cats are killed every year in At-



Samantha Shelton

lanta area shelters. In fact, more pets are killed in Atlanta shelters than in the entire country of Great Britain, New York City or the states of Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Oregon or Washington," Shelton says. "It is a problem of epidemic proportions, and FurKids wants to help Atlanta and the state to stem the epidemic."

When she started FurKids, Shelton knew she wanted the place to be unique, to foster a vibrant environment that would not only be enticing for the four-legged visitors, but also welcome in volunteers. It appears she has done as much.

Daily, new volunteers come into the office, signing up to do their part to help homeless animals. Volunteers come in all ages and varieties, from retirees and church groups to parents who bring in their children to teach them about how to handle animals.

In the past year, Shelton has witness a notable increase in volunteer power, as more and more individuals are impacted by a down-turned economy.

"The recession has been hard on us, but there has been a good thing come out of it. With more people being unemployed, they are looking to stay active and busy during their job search," Shelton says. "That has been a real silver lining."

That's not to say that the slow economy has been exactly helpful to the non-profit sector. FurKids—like most all non-profit organizations and even for-profit businesses—has certainly felt a hit from the recession, with fewer contributions being made, and more cats being in need of homes, Shelton says.

"But we will never turn down a cat," she says. "We will find a way to make it work."

One way Shelton has been fighting the challenges of a less than ideal economic setting is to join forces with fellow

crusaders. Recently Shelton fused an informal alliance with neighboring non-profit organizations, Sterile Feral and Small Dog Rescue. Tagging themselves "The Litter Mates," this trio of animal lovers has found that combining their resources and knowledge base is the key to surviving slow times. Beyond a greater contributions pool, the trio is also able to generate a greater presence for the pet over-population campaign.

Each branch of the Litter Mates brings a different perspective and goal to the non-profit table, making the collaboration that much stronger. Whereas FurKids primarily works with cats, Small Dog Rescue deals with canines, and Sterile Feral aims to educate the community about spaying and neutering pets.

"There is power in numbers," Shelton says. "We are all friends who can help each other, learn from each other and be there as support to help fix this issue."

That fix, Shelton says, does not only come by housing and caring for feral cats. That fix comes by stopping the problem before it starts. Spaying and neutering animals, be it a house pet or a stray, is utterly paramount to curbing and eventually ending the feral pet problem.

"One cat can produce an astonishing number of offspring. Spaying and neutering animals is the only way to fix this, and it is a very attainable option," Shelton says. "Helping animals is helping people. Animals give us endless love to make our lives better. It's the least we can do to help make their lives better, as well. That's my philosophy."

*FurKids has adoptions sites located at seven area pet stores. For more information about FurKids, visit [www.furkids.org](http://www.furkids.org).*