

# A Stellar Breed

Nonprofit groups step up for Houston's city animal shelter

By Bliss Foster

## ORGANIZATIONS THAT MATTER

On a rainy Texas morning, Ring, a one-year-old stray, opened her cage door and bolted from a dreary room of the Houston city shelter with her two eight-week-old pups, Chico and George. The pack of three, scheduled to be euthanized that day,

headed out of the building and straight toward their soon-to-be heroes, people who had saved 23 other dogs from death row minutes earlier.

These heroes, collectively known as Scout's Honor, a nonprofit rescue group formed in May 2006, are one of several privately funded organizations that have assumed an active role in assisting impounded animals at the city facility, commonly referred to as BARC, an acronym for the Bureau of Animal Regulation and Care. The groups' commitment to these animals has produced positive changes at BARC, including a drop in the euthanasia rate, an increase in adoptions and additional access to veterinary care.

A fiscal year at BARC begins July 1 and runs through June 30. According to Kent Robertson, BARC's bureau chief, in the 2005 fiscal year, of the 25,083 animals that were impounded at BARC, 21,214 were euthanized—an 85 percent euthanasia rate. Fiscal year 2006 yielded some improvement; of 22,584 animals impounded, 15,561 were destroyed, a 69 percent euthanasia rate. The statistics for the 2007 fiscal year indicate a further drop, with 14,039 animals euthanized of the 23,099 animals impounded, or a 61 percent euthanasia rate.

BARC is one of five major Houston animal control organizations or shelters utilizing euthanasia. In 2005, the Mayor's Animal Protection Task Force estimated that more than 80,000 animals had been euthanized in the Houston area the previous year.

### Offsite Adoptions and Animal Transfers

BARC has only 72 dog kennels and 30 cat cages onsite in its adoption program, but its "secret weapon" is its hard-working—though limited—internal volunteer pool and staff. Thus, animal transfers (which convey ownership) to approved and willing nonprofit groups and offsite adoptions have proved to be lifesaving for the lucky animals designated as "adoptable." "The two bureau chiefs prior to my arrival [in June 2006] were already trying to work with the groups ... to get the animals offsite. I've just followed down that path and opened it up even more," says Robertson, adding that BARC's internal foster programs are crucial to the adoption program.

In the 2007 fiscal year, BARC reports that 1,919 animals were transferred to rescue groups. In addition, 2,691 animals were adopted directly from the BARC adop-



tion program during the same period. A BARC veterinarian, Dr. Dave Rundell, explained that 50 to 55 percent of BARC adoptions typically take place offsite with the assistance of nonprofit groups.

Leigh Hollyer, a board member at Friends of BARC, a nonprofit group committed exclusively to BARC animals, believes offsite adoptions are a "big step forward." In past years, she explains, the nonprofit groups were not permitted to remove animals from BARC, which solidified its former reputation as a catch-and-kill facility. Hollyer said it took months of negotiations with the city to obtain permission. Now, Friends of BARC is one of two nonprofit groups helping BARC with its offsite adoptions (the other is Saving Animals Across Borders).

Scout's Honor, on the other hand, keeps

track of dogs in the BARC adoption program. The dogs can be held up to 90 days before euthanasia becomes a concern. "Prior to the 90-day expiration," says Cindy Perini, a founder and attorney for Scout's Honor, "we rescue as many dogs as we can." Perini estimates 145 dogs were transferred by BARC to the group between May 2006 and September 2007. "I consider us the last resort. If no one else will take them, we do," she says. Once Scout's Honor has custody of a dog, he goes to a foster home or spends time boarding in a Houston-area kennel until a permanent home is found; the average kennel stay is one month. Not surprisingly, the group spends thousands of dollars a week on boarding. "It's giving them the chance they need," says Perini. "Every single one of these dogs is so loved by the people who have them [now]."

For the 2007 fiscal year, the projected general fund expenditures for the City of Houston exceeded \$1.5 billion. In contrast, for the same period, BARC worked with a total budget of a little more than \$3.7 million. Hollyer says Friends of BARC


has helped cover BARC's budget shortfalls by picking up some of its costs for medical supplies, as well as allocating \$10,000 to pay for additional onsite spay-neuter surgeries. "Our budget last year was \$50,000. We spent every nickel on BARC," says Hollyer. "This year, we're hoping for more."

Scout's Honor also spends thousands of dollars on the more needy cases transferred from BARC, which includes dogs with respiratory infections, kidney stones and digestive disease. "We're trying to help the ones who don't really have anyone helping them and are overlooked by the system," comments Perini.

### Key to a Better Future

BARC's bureau chief is an optimist. Robertson envisions a day when Houston becomes a no-kill city, though he views an increase in adoption numbers as a first step, not a solution. "There have been estimates that there are 3,500 puppies and kittens born every hour in the U.S. There are only 400 humans born," he said. A successful turnaround, he believes, will

depend on responsible owners who spay and neuter their pets.

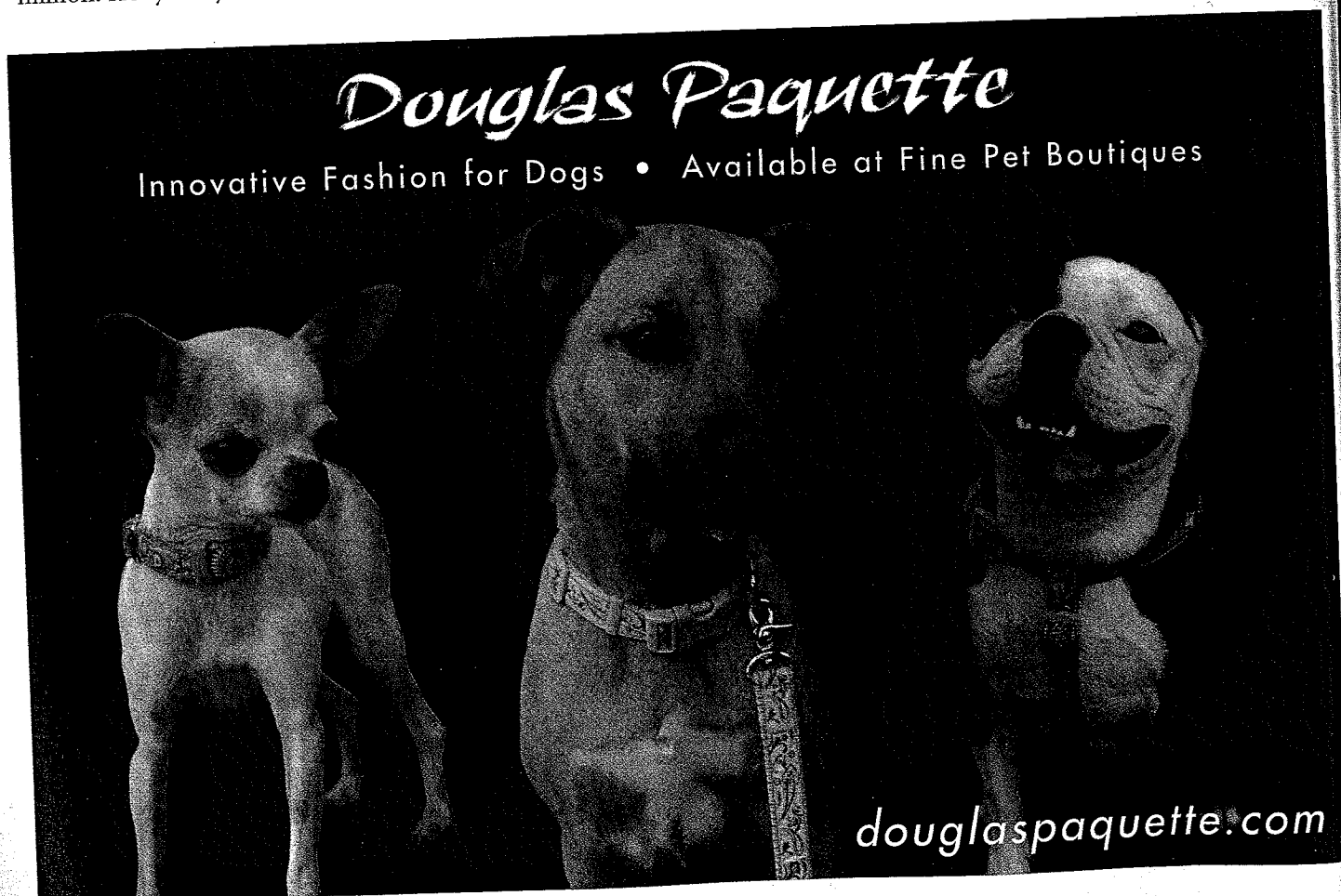
Until that time, groups like Scout's Honor and Friends of BARC will continue to help dogs like Ring, Chico and George. And the stories surrounding their efforts will remain bittersweet: Sadly, after his rescue, George died from distemper. Ring (now called Moo) and Chico were also diagnosed with the disease, but beat it. Both dogs were adopted by loving families who cherish them. "It's important to our volunteers to step up for these dogs," says Perini. "It's just a small, little step we can do." 

Bliss Foster is an attorney and freelance writer. She is a Council Member of the State Bar of Texas Animal Law Section and volunteers for the Texas Humane Legislation Network.

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