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By Jennifer Wolfe Photos by Douglas Hill

# Street People and Homeless Dogs Form Unique Bonds as Part of Innovative 'Downtown Dog Rescue' Program

**D**rive around any major city, and sooner or later you will find yourself downtown, often a deserted-looking area filled with manufacturing plants and factories punctuated by empty lots and the people who gather in them. And then there are the dogs: everywhere you look you can see dogs, some in packs, some wandering alone, and some with guardians who have no homes.

Most of us avoid spending too much time in these seemingly-deserted areas – drab and neglected, they give rise to concerns about personal safety – and most of us feel only pity for the people, and animals, who spend their lives there.

Los Angeles is no exception. The downtown area is famous for its seeming inhospitableness, and for its burgeoning homeless population. But to many people, downtown is where they call home, and, despite the bleak circumstances, where they intend to stay.

That's where Downtown Dog Rescue steps in. Downtown Dog Rescue is a unique program that is

making a difference for the many sick, neglected and abandoned dogs who have ended up living on the streets of Los Angeles. The five-year-old volunteer program finds homes for strays roaming the streets and alleys, supplies veterinary services to pets kept by the city's two-legged homeless population, and provides space and facilities for a monthly mobile spay and neuter unit sponsored by the City of Los Angeles. The aim is to make downtown a better place, and its impact is heartwarming.

When Lori Weise and Richard Tuttelmondo – both dog lovers – began managing the Modernica Furniture factory in downtown Los Angeles five years ago, they were overwhelmed and depressed by the mushrooming population of neglected dogs. They wanted to do something about the sad problems; and without any prior experience or training in animal rescue, or in dealing with L.A.'s homeless population, the two began approaching homeless dog guardians to try to make a difference. They soon made an amazing discovery, which has benefited and enhanced many lives.

**M**ost dogs belonging to homeless guardians are not abused or neglected; in fact, many of them have been rescued from abandonment by their present guardians," says Weise. "We need to keep an open mind and not judge the dogs we see on the streets. We need to get rid of preconceived notions about where dogs should live and recognize that not all dogs work well in homes. Many of the dogs we are in contact with, despite not living in a home, are with people twenty-four hours a day and are very happy and well-socialized," she explains.

Yet, despite being happy with their guardians, many of downtown's dogs are in need of medical care, including spaying and neutering, a procedure most homeless guardians do not consider when caring for their pets. Approaching guardians about spaying and neutering, however, can be difficult. "Most people are very mistrustful when we first approach them and think that we are trying to take their dog away from them," reports Weise. "But that's not what we're about."

Weise and Tuttelmondo have worked hard to create reputations



Previous page: Samuel and Teacup live together in an encampment under a freeway overpass in downtown Los Angeles. Samuel, who credits Teacup as giving him the courage to persevere, hopes to return to his home in New Mexico.

Above: Lori Weise has to make contact with the owners of this "junkyard dog," a potential rescue.

among the downtown population as people who can be trusted to help them with their dogs. Weise is fearless. She will walk into homeless

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encampments of over 100 people backed up by nothing more than plastic bags of dog food and flyers announcing their spay/neuter program. And her determination is paying off. Over five years, Downtown Dog Rescue has been responsible for spaying or neutering hundreds of dogs, and has found adoptive homes for nearly 250 pets.

Downtown Dog Rescue's adoption program is different from many others in that it attempts to keep prior guardians and adoptive families in touch with each other. Weise lets pet guardians understand that they are "calling the shots," and that the difficult decision to have their dog adopted by another family is ultimately theirs.

Homeless pet guardians become as attached to their charges as any other animal guardian; and, even as they recognize that they may not be able to supply all of the care their pets need, separation can be heartbreaking.

Weise finds ways to enable homeless pet guardians who cannot keep their pets remain close to their dogs. She stays in touch with the adoptive families, collecting photographs and stories to bring back to the original guardians, and in a few instances has even managed to set up periodic visits. Adoptive families are pre-screened, including home visits to ensure there are appropriate facilities for pets, and the dogs themselves are carefully evaluated and given socialization training to help them acclimate to their new

environments.

Not all dogs are right for adoption into a conventional family however; nor are all homeless pet guardians

Coco lives in the same homeless encampment as Samuel and Teacup. Coco's guardian remains anonymous, but does what she can to help the dog she loves.



willing to give up the dogs they love. Downtown Dog Rescue will arrange for foster care for dogs whose guardians simply need some time to get their resources together in order to care properly for their pets. "Whatever the dog needs, and whatever the guardian will let us do, we'll do it," declares Weise. "And we'll do everything we can to educate dog guardians so that they understand how to properly care for their dogs."

Benny Joseph, locally known as "the downtown dog man," has lived

in a private semi-permanent encampment in the downtown area for over 20 years, and is one of the area's most active animal advocates.

"Downtown Dog Man" Benny Joseph, 58, with Terry (left) and Lizzie (right) at his encampment.



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Working with Downtown Dog Rescue, Joseph has fostered dozens of dogs in need of temporary shelter, and rescued dozens more.

Lizzie was a typical junkyard dog, working in the yard of a local produce packing plant. Lizzie kept running away to be with Joseph

until he and Downtown Dog Rescue were finally able to convince the packing plant's owners to let him keep her. Downtown Dog Rescue provided medical treatment for Lizzie, who was severely malnourished, and made

arrangements to have her spayed.

**T**erry is another dog rescued by Joseph, after her original homeless guardian had tied her up and abandoned her in a box underneath a freeway overpass. Downtown Dog Rescue found her and brought her to Joseph for fostering and rehabilitation. Sadly, she initially kept running away from Joseph's site, going back to the spot of her abandonment in order to wait for her original guardian. It was weeks before Terry finally gave up her search and settled down. Today, Terry and Lizzie happily live together with the downtown dog man.

Downtown Dog Rescue is a not-for-profit organization operating solely on adoption fees and donations and grants solicited on their behalf by an affiliate program, Friends for Animals. Later this year, as a fundraiser, Downtown Dog Rescue will offer a calendar for sale featuring pictures of many of downtown's dogs

and their guardians. Weise is careful to point out that while Downtown Dog Rescue does offer referrals and other assistance to homeless pet guardians, all funds donated to the program are spent directly on animal care.

Science Diet also donates dog food to the program on a regular basis, but much of the funding for their animal rescue operations comes directly from the pockets of Tuttelmondo and Weise themselves. The owners of Modernica, the furniture factory managed by the dog rescuers, provide space in their plant for the operation, including an area for dogs up for adoption, and allows the pair to use company trucks for transport.

Professional dog trainer Leslie Stein donates her time to Downtown Dog Rescue to rehabilitate rescued dogs and offers group classes at half-off to adoptive families and their new charges. Dr. Edward Simon from L.A. Central Animal Hospital also donates his time and clinic facilities to the program. Day or night, he will treat any dog brought in by Weise and Tuttelmondo, in any condition, and without an appointment.

Weise is pleased about the resources the program has been able to gather and the help they have been able to offer. "We wanted to make a difference. We can't help everybody, but we can at least help the dogs and the people we come into contact with. If everyone cared for just the dogs in their area, this would all be taken care of."

For those who want to help, the program is always looking for blankets, canned food, dog toys, used collars and leashes. Anyone who would like to donate goods, or is interested in purchasing the calendar featuring dogs and their guardians who have been helped by Downtown Dog Rescue, should call Lori Weise at (213) 683-1963, or write to Friends for Animals, Attn: Downtown Dog Rescue, P.O. Box 5280, North Hollywood, CA 91616, before sending or dropping off goods.

More information about this inspirational program and its needs is available on the Internet at [www.downtowndogrescue.com](http://www.downtowndogrescue.com) or [www.friendsforanimals.org](http://www.friendsforanimals.org). We congratulate Lori and Richard for this innovative program that benefits so many two and four-leggers. 🐾

*Jennifer Wolfe is the new Associate Editor of Animal Guardian. She has worked in the not-for-profit community for over five years and currently lives with her husband and three cats, Annabelle, Sally and Hollis, in Los Angeles, CA.*