

# REWARDED FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR

## *The Walter Turken Training for Adoption Program Gives Shelter Dogs a Second Chance*

*By Brian Kilcommons*

*All photographs courtesy of the Walter  
Turken Training for Adoption Program*

**W**alter Turken was a loving husband, an attentive father, a major league dog person, a personal mentor, my friend and, in December of 1999, he was also dying of cancer.

The year before, Bob Berrins, who started the Dog Project in North Hempstead, New York, had called me to see if I would help train the volunteers at the Town of North Hempstead Animal Shelter. I agreed to donate my time and asked Toni Kay-Wolff, a local trainer from the Well-Mannered Dog, to help.

As my involvement progressed, Walter and I had many discussions about the Town of North Hempstead program. The objectives concerned were: how was this program making a difference, and how was this program changing the perceptions of the community about Animal Control while creating a public relations and educational vehicle that increased support within the community?

Walter was quietly listening in ways I could not imagine. Just days before his death, he had started a legacy at the Humane Society of Collier County, Florida, a legacy that has become The Walter Turken Training

for Adoption Program (WTTAP). His goal was to continue and expand a program to make dogs more adoptable through training and, ultimately, successfully place them in loving homes.

Walter taught me through deed and action that a single individual can influence the lives of many. That concept is the cornerstone of the WTTAP: that individuals in the community – individuals with little or no previous training experience, but with endless heart – can change the lives of many.

## *Count to Five... Million*

The American Veterinary Medical Association estimates that five million dogs a year, a conservative estimate, are surrendered and many are euthanized in our shelters due to training and behavior problems. One-third of those dogs are purebreds. About 90% of all dogs surrendered have never had any obedience training. This does not include the dogs being rescued and placed by purebred breed rescues and private individuals.

The Walter Turken Training for Adoption Program acts as a catalyst to establish communication and enhance the vital relationships between rescue groups, animal shelters and humane societies and their mutual goals to place dogs in loving homes. One of the problems shelters face is poor community perception. Too many people see animal control as “the pound” – a place of death, a place where “bad” and “problem” dogs go. Humane societies often suffer the same perception, especially if they are an open-intake facility.

People may not like going to shelters since it brings into sharp focus this desperate situation. At some facilities, it is like walking into an insane asylum with jumping dogs screaming for attention and overstimulated dogs reacting to every tiny stimulus. Since many of these dogs are held for months in both open-intake (kill) and limited-intake (no kill) facilities, active intervention is mandatory if the dogs are to avoid becoming unadoptable. When we take social animals and iso-

late them in environments devoid of the possibility of normal behavior, the only behaviors the dogs can develop are unwanted/undesirable ones. The neurotic behavior of these warehoused animals is what people frequently encounter when they walk into many shelters. Is it any wonder then that the placement of mature large dogs is a constant challenge?

## *Taking a Timeout*

This is where WTTAP has proven to be very effective. Teaching dogs to sit when people approach the kennels results in a less hectic experience for everyone involved. Where the dogs are taught to walk calmly around other animals, wait by doorways, sit down and stay on command, the value of each dog is increased...the stress level of the dog drops and each is able to present himself in a better light. Mr. Terry Tilley, Executive Director of the Humane Society of Collier County, remarked, “Our shelter has happier dogs, quieter, less nervous dogs – in other words, dogs who now have a purpose and who are enjoying themselves while they wait for a new home”.

The population in shelters is a genetic and behavioral cocktail of the good, confused and unadoptable. Too many shelters do not yet have trained staff for temperament testing of the dogs. Dogs with dangerous or unwanted behaviors are often adopted out with the rationale that they are “at least getting a chance.” When the dog is returned, perception within the shelters tends to be that the adopters were the problem, not the dog or the placement.

Every time a dog is returned the perception is that the dogs in shelters are damaged goods. The saying “if you have a good experience you tell two other people, if you have a bad experience you tell twenty” certainly applies here!

It is both a foreign and somewhat shocking perspective for many in the shelter community, but every shelter is producing a “product” – building a “brand” reputation. As

with any other business, the consistent quality of what is provided ensures the success of the enterprise.

**S**o, what is the quality of this product that is being put up for adoption? After the dog is adopted, will their friends and family come in to get a dog “just like Ralph”? Are we creating a desire for our product? Are we screening what is being offered to ensure a consistent quality of product? Are we offering and placing these animals where the individual needs of the adoptee and adopters are being met? Are we creating a greater real value with the dogs we are offering for adoption?

We have a lot of work to do to provide a consistent product. Especially with the variability of temperaments in the dogs and the real or perceived wants of the people who are adopting a dog. Each dog is a unique being who is matched to the home he or she is going into. Quality assurance is “job one” if we want to build more consistent community demand for these life-long companions. We need to establish community confidence that a dog from our facility will be a safe, trainable and cherished family member.

## *Learn to Share*

And yet, where so many facilities are stretched to the maximum already, how can more services be possible? In one word: Volunteers.

Terry Tilley praised the Turken Program’s emphasis on volunteerism: “[The Turken Program] brought a whole new corps of concerned citizens to the training group. All of the others, more than forty, are now a vital part of our volunteer program. They, too, are a great source of positive publicity for our shelter in the community.”

The community response to a call for volunteers has been overwhelming. It is safe to say that there are large

untapped human resources ready and willing to help if only an avenue can be created for them to do so. The volunteers are not only a cost-effective training force but also shelter ambassadors and community educators.

In the WTTAP, volunteers are taught breed identification, typical characteristics and how to read canine body language from the start. Next, the volunteers learn the correct use of leads and collars, how to administer food rewards and general safety procedures, such as how to take dogs in and out of the kennels without incident.

The dogs are taught commands such as, let’s go, sit, down, wait and stay. Good manners, such as not jumping or mouthing, are encouraged. Since most of the dogs have received little if any effective training, we start teaching routines the dogs will face in everyday situations: sitting upon approach in kennels, waiting by doorways and sitting for attention. And it seems to be having a positive impact.

Marie Hope Davis, Executive Director at the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League in West Palm Beach, Florida agrees: “Brian and the Turken Program have impacted our shelter by bringing to us dedicated volunteers to work with our shelter animals, which has created a higher level of community awareness. Our dogs are better socialized, thus increasing adoptions, decreasing returns and reducing the numbers of our animals euthanized due to behavior problems. An added benefit has been the increase of employee morale. Like all shelter employees, they love the animals but they see the best and the worst. A program such as this gives hope and allows them to see first hand results: better behaved animals

being adopted and fewer animals being returned. For them and for us it’s a victory, one animal at a time.”

Sue Hassett, Director of the Town of North Hempstead Animal Control noted, “we moved from being an animal control facility known as the Pound to creating a progressive organization where we partnered with the community based on education, involvement and adoption. What was truly stunning was when we learned that we had increased adoptions 50% and reduced returns 50% at the Town of North Hempstead Animal Control.”

## *Positive Enforcement*

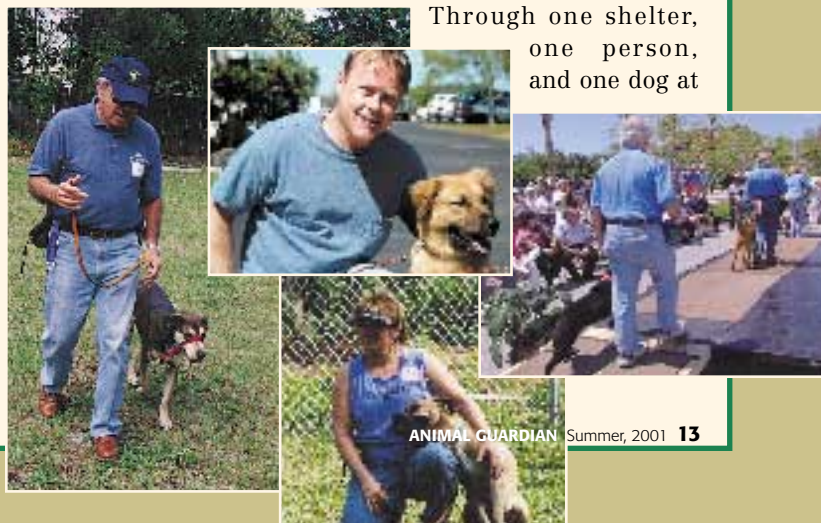
We don’t claim to have invented the wheel – there are a number of training programs now available for shelters to consider. The Humane Society of the United States in conjunction with the Dumb Friends League in Denver have programs, and trainers Sue Sternberg, Trish King, Pat Miller and Ian Dunbar all offer options built on their own unique experience and priorities.

Simply put, training programs can work, increasing adoptions and decreasing returns. Do they demand time, energy and organization from the shelter itself? Yes. Is this a simple process? No. Can that time, energy and hassle be repaid? Many times over. Every time a happy dog goes out the door to a new home and never comes back.

While Walter’s presence is no longer with us, his spirit and legacy lives on through The Walter Turken Training for Adoption Program.

Through one shelter, one person, and one dog at

**Clockwise from right: Well-trained candidates for adoption are presented to potential owners; taking a break during a training session; a Turken trainer working with a candidate for adoption; Brian Kilcommons.**



a time, Walter's work to make dogs more adoptable lives on to provide rewards for all involved.

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*Brian Kilcommons, one of our nation's foremost authorities on pet behavior, has more than 25 years experience in human/animal relationships. As a master dog trainer*

**Volunteers at adoption training facilities like WTAP (below) learn the correct use of leads and collars, how to administer food rewards and general safety procedures. Proper training produces dogs that are better equipped to become safe, trainable family members.**

*and noted author, he educates pet owners in training and behavior modification. Kilcommons serves as the executive director for the Walter Turken Training Adoption Program and is co-founder and chairman of GreatPets.com. He is the co-author of several books, including Good Owners, Great Dogs; Tales From The Bark Side; Paws to Consider and Childproofing Your Dog. Kilcommons believes a good owner knows the importance of effective training techniques and understands the world from their pets' point of view.*

*He is also a part time educator at*

*Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine and has been a behavior and training coordinator for the ASPCA, pet expert for WABC News, "CBS Morning News" and the host of Fox News Channel's "Pet News," a national television show devoted to pets.*

This program has been seeded by Walter Turken and the foundation he created. In order to continue, it is essential to receive additional funding from the public. To learn more about this program visit [www.great-pets.com](http://www.great-pets.com). To help the Turken Program continue its great work, (planned events are scheduled for Toronto, Dallas, Seattle and many other locations) donations and further questions may be directed to:

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