

April 20, 2004

FamilyCircle®

www.familycircle.com

Flea Market Flair

15 PRETTY MAKEOVERS

Supermarket
Secrets

More Groceries
for Less Money

How to Zap
Any Stain

Take Years-
Off Your Looks

**RESTAURANT
DIET QUIZ**

Eat Smart & Lose

Shrink Your
Female Fat Zones

Easy 5-Ingredient Meals

Cut Carbs
Now!

Delicious
Main
Dishes



All God's Creatures



For some of the homeless, a dog is all they have.

Lori Weise and her co-worker Richard Tuttelmondo built a rescue center to care for dogs living on the streets.

By Donna Elizabeth Boetig

On the banks of the Los Angeles River, Leroy,* a burly homeless man, pleaded for the life of his dog, Bow-Wow. He had saved the scruffy mongrel from starving two years earlier, and the two had been inseparable ever since. Now a deliveryman taunted Leroy by deliberately backing his van over the animal. Alerted to the torture, Lori Weise, 39, drove quickly from her workplace nearby to help.

"I'll kill him," Leroy yelled after the deliveryman.

"You'll go to prison," Lori said, masking her own anger as they swaddled the dog in a sheet.

"I don't care," he insisted, his eyes filling with tears.

"Please. Please don't do it," she urged.

Slowly Leroy's anger drained. Only for Lori would he back down from seeking justice.

"I never thought I'd see him cry," she says. "I don't care where you live, Beverly Hills or Skid Row, if you love your dog, the tears are the same."

Eight years ago, when Lori began working as manager of Modernica Furniture in downtown Los Angeles, she no-

ticed stray dogs in the alley scrounging for food. Her heart ached to see their ribs protruding and their fur scratched bare because of fleas. She fed them, hugged them and took them to a vet. But Lori soon realized they were only a fraction of the hundreds of malnourished and ill canines living on the streets, many belonging to the homeless.

In 1998, determined to do more to help street dogs, Lori and one of her co-workers, Richard Tuttelmondo, founded Downtown Dog Rescue, an affiliate of the larger

Clockwise: Benny Joseph, a homeless man, helps rescue dogs; Mark DeCicco and pal Disco lead new lives; Dr. Edward Simon treats a patient.



Photos, Ann Summa.

Donna Elizabeth Boetig, a frequent contributor to FAMILY CIRCLE, lives in Crownsville, Maryland.

* Names followed by an asterisk have been changed.

The homeless are glad they have an angel on their side of the street.

Women Who Make a Difference Continued from page 17
not-for-profit Friends for Animals. They transformed their company's backyard into an emergency rescue center, complete with cozy doghouses, brightly painted flower boxes, palm trees and a doggy pool.

Since then Lori, Richard and a handful of volunteers have rescued hundreds of dogs all over Los Angeles from starvation and abuse and placed them in loving homes. Countless more are regularly fed, given medical care and continue to live happily on the streets with their owners. The center runs on a budget of \$25,000 a year, all from donations. Lori and Richard often reach into their pockets too.

Armed with a smile, a bag of dog food, and a load of respect, Lori fearlessly enters homeless camps. "The homeless are glad they have an angel on their side of the street," says an animal control officer with the Los Angeles City Animal Services, who sometimes works undercover.

"May I give your dog a treat?" Lori gently asks a man with a pit bull/Lab mix. The dog, tail held high, warms to her. Soon its owner comes around too. "Would you like help in caring for your dog?" she asks. The man isn't sure what to make of this generosity. He nods O.K. Then Lori zeroes in on her mission: "Can your dog still have babies?" The man smiles, proud of his dog's fertility. Lori then takes out pencil and paper and draws two dogs, under them seven dogs, then forty-nine, until the page is filled. The man gets it. In exchange for dog food he agrees to let Lori have his pet spayed.

It's not always this easy. Some homeless people rebuke Lori when she asks to neuter their dog. And when an animal is neglected or abused, things can get thorny. Then Lori patiently tries to explain how much better off the dog would be with someone who could care for it. "Some homeless are terrified they'll never see their dog again," she says. "The animal is all they have." Lori respects the bond. Unless a dog is in danger, "the call has to be theirs."

When Lori does rescue an animal, her work just begins. At best, the dogs are scared and insecure, at worst they're malnourished and sick, with broken bones, missing teeth and mange. Some dogs have been hit by cars, poisoned, hung on a pole to strangle. The atrocities are unimaginable. "She works 24/7 bringing these dogs back from the dead," says Sondra Davis, president of Friends for Animals. If the dog is not in immediate danger, Lori bathes and feeds it. Natural Balance and Science Diet donate food. Edward Simon, D.V.M., of L.A. Central Animal Hospital then provides discounted veterinary care. After the dog settles in, either at the rescue center or at a foster home, Lori and Richard determine its temperament and train it. When ready for adoption, the pooch's photo appears on the Web site www.friendsforanimals.org. Lori finds half her dogs' new homes through the Internet, others

through dog showings at PETCO pet supply stores. While some strays have been adopted into Hollywood Hills homes, Lori insists that "dogs don't need fancy houses; they need human companionship." In fact, she sees how happy some dogs are living with their homeless owners, and how their owners struggle to care for them. "If you give a sandwich to a homeless person, most times he'll break it in half for his dog," says the animal control officer.

Although Lori set out to help dogs, she helps many of their owners too. On a typical Saturday Lori drives 45 minutes from her suburban home into the city to make the rounds. Today's destination: Skid Row, the toughest part of Los Angeles, where drive-by shootings and drug deals are commonplace. First stop: The Downtown Dog Man, Benny Joseph. "Hello, Benny," Lori says. "Here Terry, here Lizzy," she calls to his two pets. The dogs and Benny call a composite of cardboard boxes and garbage cans home. "I brought your favorite flavor Hawaiian Punch," Lori chirps, handing the drink to Benny along with some dog food. He's one of the street people who work with Lori, helping her earn the trust of the homeless, alerting her to abused dogs and fostering them until she can find space.

After a quick hug Lori is off to Chinatown to check on aging Mexican immigrants Francisco and Mercedes. Mercedes snuggles with two German Shepherds, Moma and Poppa, on the sidewalk under a blue tarp. Outside, Francisco stands guard with a third dog. Lori peeks into the tent. "Can I take you to the eye doctor?" she asks the woman, who is nearly blind with cataracts. Mercedes nods yes. Lori hands her cans of food and new underwear, making a mental note to schedule an eye exam for her at a nearby clinic. Francisco hands Lori a large rock teens threw into the tent. He tells her that he chased the kids and was arrested. Lori assures him that she'll speak up for him in court.

Lori looks at her watch. It's time to visit Maria,* who lives in a river shanty. She became Lori's helper when she saved a dog from drowning. Today Maria shows Lori five sick pups she rescued from a highway. Lori thanks her, then rushes the pups to Dr. Simon. The vet's diagnosis is grim: parvovirus, a serious disease. He feeds them antibiotics, but sadly, it's no use. Within the week they all die.

In another cage at the animal hospital a white pit bull named Crystal recovers from exhaustion after trekking miles with Michael, a homeless man barely out of his teens. Lori made a deal with Michael: Return home to Indiana and find a job and she'd send Crystal. To seal his promise, Michael removed his silver ring, his only possession of value, and slipped it onto Crystal's collar.

After finishing her rounds, Lori stops at Modernica. Inside, Mark DeCicco, 42, works in assembly. Two years ago he and his dog, Disco, were on the street, too. Lori found him a home and taught him a trade. Today he's working and earning his college degree.

"The things I have seen haunt me," admits Lori, who says that memories of dogs that didn't make it sometimes keep her awake at night. But she knows that, in the end, the successes are what matter most. Recently she opened a letter from Michael, grateful to be back home in Indiana working and caring for his beloved Crystal. "Without your help," he wrote, "we'd still be out there somewhere." **FC**