

## ARE YOU PETRIOTIC?

*Commentary by Lanie Wagenberg, Valley Oak SPCA*

Are you "Petriotic"? The theme for the 10th annual Spay Day USA (February 24) is a clever one, designed to get people's attention about a very serious and tragic crisis: pet overpopulation.

It's certainly an appropriate theme since, as Americans, we call ourselves a nation of animal lovers. The number of companion animals who share our homes is at an all time high. But what do we have to show for it? Every day in the United States, thousands upon thousands of puppies and kittens are born because of uncontrolled breeding. Every year, between six and eight million dogs and cats enter U.S. shelters; some three-to-four million of these animals are euthanized because there are not enough homes for them. Millions more never even make it to shelters. Abandoned by their owners, they ultimately die of starvation, exposure or disease. We have allowed euthanasia to become the accepted method of population control and we should be ashamed of ourselves. We have become complacent while someone else takes care of the problem behind closed doors.



The vast majority of dogs and cats who enter animal shelters would make wonderful companions. They are as sweet and loving as our own cherished pets. Some are fortunate enough to leave by way of the front door in the arms of a loving adopter willing to give them a second chance. But far, far too many exit shelters through the "back door"- in a barrel or as cremated ashes.

I suspect that a large percentage of the people reading this column have animal companions who are already spayed or neutered. Many are probably concerned about the overpopulation problem, about the innocent lives lost, the tax dollars wasted. A few may even have thought of the toll taken on shelter workers who care for homeless dogs and cats and are then forced to euthanize one animal after another.

As overwhelming as the problem of pet overpopulation is, it can be solved. In only a few years, carefully planned and implemented sterilization programs could produce a dramatic reduction in the number of unwanted companion animals born. Since 1997, Valley Oak SPCA has been operating a low-cost spay/neuter clinic and we are reaching out to local veterinarians to join our efforts to provide affordable sterilization services to the community.

Our major effort this year will be to educate the public about the importance of spaying or neutering companion animals. We implore you to join us. First and foremost, it's essential that you have your own dog or cat sterilized. Beyond that, you can help by educating others. Unless people know the facts about pet overpopulation and the many benefits of spaying and neutering, they are unlikely to take action. And if you're financially able, why not help out a neighbor or friend who can't afford the surgery?

Spaying and neutering is the only way we can reach the point of balance between supply and demand- a day when companion animals will become more valuable and, hopefully, treated with more kindness and respect.