

**From Rescue to Recovery: The Role of Volunteering and Fostering in Animal Shelters**

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## **Abstract**

This honors thesis explores the profound impact of fostering and volunteering for All Aboard Animal Rescue (AAAR), a foster-based nonprofit dedicated to reducing euthanasia rates and matching adoptable animals with loving homes. Through my experiences volunteering and fostering, I wanted to address critical issues in animal welfare while reflecting on the broader environmental, ethical, and philosophical implications of fostering. My engagement with AAAR was both personally fulfilling and educational, allowing me to witness the transformation of animals like Bubba, a long-term foster, from being overlooked to being a great companion. This project highlights how fostering not only saves lives but also aligns with environmental sustainability by mitigating ecological harm caused by euthanasia practices. Frameworks like utilitarianism and altruism emphasize the importance of reducing suffering and maximizing well-being. This thesis also examines the societal benefits of adoption, including its positive impact on families, and counters misconceptions about rescue animals.

I volunteered and fostered with All Aboard Animal Rescue (AAAR) which is a non-profit animal rescue dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for both pets and people through the process of matching adoptable animals with their forever homes. Their mission is more than just helping dogs and cats; they also provide educational resources to adoptive families and the community to ensure that each animal has a lasting, positive transition into its new home. By reducing euthanasia rates throughout the U.S., which is their ultimate goal, All Aboard has a meaningful impact not only on animals' lives but also on broader societal and environmental spectrum. They operate as a foster-based organization rather than having a physical shelter, relying on volunteers and foster families who consistently step up to support these animals in need.

My role included both fostering and general volunteer work. I initially learned about AAAR through a friend, and I was inspired to start helping over a year ago by my sister, who has been involved with them for a while and we even started by fostering together. I took on fostering whenever my schedule allowed. I fell in love with these animals and found so much joy in feeling like I was giving them a good temporary home. Soon after fostering because I was so happy making a difference during my busier weeks I started volunteering when I couldn't commit to fostering for the week or often times the longer commitments they needed. Though fostering brought challenges, especially when it came time to saying goodbye, it was very rewarding for me. The longest period I fostered was over four months long and I really bonded with the dog, Bubba. Each Saturday, I'd take him to adoption events where he was often overlooked due to being a Pitbull mix and it was heartbreaking for me. Despite the wait, I knew he would eventually find the home he deserved and after being in the rescue for over a year he

finally did. He wasn't always easy to take care of, he had a weak stomach and had accidents and threw up often in the house, he did not like other dogs and reacted badly to seeing them, he was not great at walks which he needed lots of due to being a big dog, but that's part of the process of having and training a dog. I still cherished every moment I had him because I truly love taking care of animals and having the companionship.

### **My Goals and Process**

The reason I chose this as my honors thesis project is my passion for animals and community service. I have seven dogs at home and leaving them behind to attend college was quite difficult for me, especially leaving my own dog, who had been a strong emotional support system for me. I trained my dog when I adopted him many years ago after being in a dog mill. We had to start from the beginning with his training even though he was already about six years old when we got him. He had lots of health issues which he continues to have including a heart murmur and is now having seizures. I started fostering to help fill the void I felt not having my pets around. I had the goal of making a difference in these animals' lives but also selfishly to feel a fulfillment from these dogs.

All Aboard Animal Rescue has a weekly schedule they send to volunteers. Every week there is an animal transport day, typically on Wednesday. On this day they need fosters for each animal and during the weeks I knew I had the time to devote to these animals, I offered to foster. There was usually a list of the incoming animals, and I could foster whoever I chose otherwise I got assigned a dog. Like I mentioned, on weeks I didn't have the time to foster I would look at the schedule to see if I have the availability to volunteer. Every Monday they send out an email for their schedule which for the most part is consistent but once in a while switches up such as

Thanksgiving week. They make it super easy and flexible for volunteers so even when I have busy weeks, I can still find the time in their schedule to volunteer.

I had no doubt that this project would be my thesis topic, and the experience proved to be both therapeutic and personally fulfilling. The overall volunteer work and fostering aligned closely with those of other AAAR volunteers, as we all focused on preparing animals for adoption, providing basic care, and supporting the start of their better life. Many of us shared a genuine passion for animal welfare, however, my approach also differed from some volunteers, especially those who joined to fulfill required volunteer hours. While their motivation may have been different, we all made the same impact while sharing the goal of improving the well-being of these animals and preparing them for loving homes.

### **Ethical and Environmental Reflections**

This project taught me that fostering isn't just about finding homes for animals—it's deeply connected to environmental sustainability, ethics, and philosophy. I never thought I'd connect the simple act of caring for a dog to environmental impacts, but it became clear to me how reducing euthanasia can help ecosystems. Improper carcass disposal from euthanized animals can harm wildlife and pollute soil and water with chemicals like pentobarbital, found in euthanasia solutions (FDA, 2023). I remember learning about this issue and thinking about how Bubba, the dog I fostered for four months, could have faced such a fate if it weren't for AAAR. Realizing that fostering isn't just saving lives but also protecting the environment gave my efforts a much deeper meaning.

Fostering compelled me to reflect on the ethical responsibilities we, as humans, have toward animals. One article I read argued that humans and animals have equal moral worth, and that prioritizing existing lives over creating new ones is crucial when so many animals are

homeless (Overall, 2017). This perspective resonated with me as I cared for Bubba and saw his transformation. Like children, animals need stable, loving homes for their well-being, and it broke my heart to think about how many don't get the chance to experience that kind of care. Witnessing Bubba's resilience reinforced my belief in the importance of fostering and inspired me to continue helping animals in need.

I believe my project is based on the philosophical frameworks of utilitarianism and altruism. Utilitarianism is centered on maximizing happiness and reducing suffering, which aligns perfectly with animal welfare work (Bentham, 1789). The joy on an adopter's face when they find their perfect companion embodies this principle. I felt this most deeply with Bubba, despite the challenges of caring for him. He wasn't easy—his weak stomach and anxiety around other dogs made every day a learning experience. But when he finally found his forever home, I felt a happiness I can't put into words. That moment made every sacrifice worth it.

Altruism, which focuses on concern for others even at a personal cost, is also at the heart of fostering (Comte, 1851). It's not always convenient, and it certainly takes time and energy. But the rewards far outweigh the costs. Sitting quietly with a scared puppy or watching an animal grow more confident every day has shown me that the small sacrifices we make can profoundly impact their lives—and, in turn, ours. This is why fostering isn't just an act of care but a deeply meaningful way to make a difference.

### **Why Adopting Means Saving Lives**

When I decided to adopt my dog, I didn't just gain a pet—I gained a companion who taught me patience, responsibility, and unconditional love. Like many shelter dogs, he came with quirks; I had to train him to overcome his habit of avoiding grass when it was time to go outside. It wasn't easy, but then again, training a puppy from a breeder wouldn't have been simple either.

Adopting him really made me understand what pet ownership really entails and that it is a lifelong commitment. Sadly, some people exploit the demand for pets, breeding animals for profit, often in illegal or inhumane ways (Jarvis, 2021). It breaks my heart to think about the millions of dogs entering shelters each year in the U.S., over a million of whom are euthanized (Deleeuw, 2010). Rescues like AAAR work tirelessly to change these heartbreaking statistics, finding homes for animals and promoting compatibility during adoptions to strengthen bonds between pets and their new families (González-Ramírez, 2019).

Families having pets are more common than you'd think—about 60% of households have at least one pet, and among families with children over six, that number jumps to 78%. I imagine these numbers soared during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people sought companionship. Unfortunately, not all homes provide a safe or loving environment. In some cases, pets endure violence or neglect, becoming targets of abuse. I've seen this firsthand while volunteering at AAAR. Just recently, a beautiful Husky puppy was dropped off because some kids had bought her from Facebook Marketplace without their parents' permission. Their mom left her at our office, not wanting her. It's stories like these that make me so grateful for shelters. They give animals a second chance—whether they're escaping abusive homes, being surrendered due to life changes, or simply unwanted.

I think stereotypes about shelter animals play a big role in why people hesitate to adopt. Some assume rescue dogs are less worthy than those from breeders, but research says otherwise. Studies show rescue dogs are just as loving and capable as any other pets, with minimal differences in behavior, cognitive abilities, and personality (O'Riordan & Roth, 2023). In fact, rescued dogs sometimes outperform their counterparts on memory tests, and any initial fearfulness they might display tends to fade with time and care. A positive attitude from adopters

plays a huge role here; adopting with optimism can make a big difference in a dog's adjustment (Vitulova, 2018).

Shelters also set adopters up for success by offering resources on training and care. Guides like Adamson's (2005) walk families through choosing the right pet and creating a smooth transition for both animal and owner. With these tools, I've seen adopters transform nervous, timid rescues into beloved family members. The benefits of adoption don't stop there. I came across studies showing how pets positively impact children's development. For example, one study found that preschoolers aged three to five who lived with dogs had better socialization skills than their peers without pets (Dueñas, 2021). Another study showed similar results, with children from dog-owning families displaying stronger social-emotional skills and fewer behavioral issues (Wenden, 2020). It's amazing to think that adopting a rescue animal doesn't just save their life—it can also improve the lives of everyone in their new family.

Reflecting on this project I truly feel like I gained a lot. I felt that I got a lot of personal fulfillments out of it but even more than that gained a deeper understanding of animal shelters and welfare practices. Even as a dog owner, I learned more about caring for animals, particularly those with a more shy or nervous temperament like we often had. My work with All Aboard Animal Rescue began before this project and it will undoubtedly continue after this thesis and graduation—it has become a meaningful part of my life. I look forward to volunteering, even on days when I'm tired after work, because every task, from preparing foster kits to sitting quietly with a nervous puppy, is something I genuinely enjoy. Reflecting on this project, I feel like there were very few mistakes made. If I could change anything, it would be to dedicate more time to the literature and academic research on this subject. Overall, I'm grateful and glad to have

chosen a thesis topic that I'm so passionate about and I'm excited to keep supporting AAAR after my academic journey.

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