

# Mississippi pets are Homeward Bound



CVM students Amy White (left), Krista Gazzola and Megan Caulfield helped prepare young dogs for the trip to their new homes in the Northeast.

## By Bonnie Coblentz

Supply and demand forces are saving pet lives in Mississippi and making puppies and kittens available to owners in the Northeast.

Krista Gazzola, a second-year veterinary student at Mississippi State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, has a soft place in her heart for young strays.

"When I got to Starkville last fall, I started picking up puppies and young adult dogs off the side of the road and trying to find them homes," Gazzola said. "I thought to myself, 'If I don't figure out a way to find more homes, then I'm going to have about 80 million dogs by the time I get out of vet school.'"

Gazzola, who is from Deerfield, N.H., has friends from New York and Massachusetts. They realized that the abundance of puppies in the South does not extend to their home states, and people there often do not have the opportunity to adopt young pets from shelters.

"The pet overpopulation issue is not as big up there as it is here," Gazzola said. "You won't go to a shelter there and find a litter of babies."

Gazzola said many people have realized that there are a lot of "cute mutt pups" that are just as good as the purebreds.

"If they're going to get a dog anyway, they might as well adopt it," she said.

Gazzola and her friends took advantage of that mindset and began matching people looking for pets with pets that need homes.

They started the Homeward Bound project through the veterinary college's Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare Program. Homeward Bound has taken ten loads of pets to New Hampshire and New York to be adopted.

"We have transported 120 pets, and seven of these were kittens," Gazzola said. "We hope to have 40 to 50 more on the next trip. Our eventual goal is to send these puppies straight to no-kill shelters, but now we're sending them straight to homes."

Dr. Phil Bushby, the Marcia Lane Endowed Professor of Humane Ethics and Animal Welfare and coordinator of CVM's shelter medicine program, is providing guidance, funding management and oversight of the Homeward Bound project.

"There are estimates that 4 million to 9 million dogs and cats are euthanized in animal shelters in the United States each year. But the surplus of animals is not the same in every state," Bushby said. "We had students from New Hampshire, New York and Massachusetts who were surprised at the number of animals in local shelters and the number being euthanized."

Bushby said some states aggressively encourage pet sterilization through awareness programs and by requiring higher licensing fees for owners of reproductively intact animals. These states don't have a pet overpopulation, but they end up with a different problem.

"In some states, there are more people wanting to adopt animals than there are animals to adopt," Bushby said. "It's a shame to see a healthy dog or cat euthanized in Mississippi because of overpopulation, and then see someone in another state having to purchase dogs or cats from pet stores because they don't have adoptable pets in their shelters."

All pets taken north by Homeward Bound are spayed or neutered, have age-appropriate vaccinations, have been screened for diseases and have spent their last 7 to 10 days in Mississippi in foster care.

"The whole idea is to take healthy, adoptable animals from shelters in Mississippi and send them to states that don't have the same overpopulation problem," Bushby said.

Currently, pets headed for adoption in the Northeast come from the Columbus-Lowndes Humane Society shelter. 2006 CVM graduate Dr. Meg Sutton participates in the Homeward Bound program and helped transport many of the animals. The Oktibbeha County Humane Society has expressed interest in joining this program.

Homeward Bound charges the new owners a \$100 adoption fee. Half of this money goes to the Columbus-Lowndes Humane Society to cover the adoption fee, and the rest helps pay Homeward Bound travel expenses.

"We want the adoption fee to cover the expenses of vaccinating, screening and transporting the animals, pay the originating shelter its adoption fee and reimburse the shelters up north for any expenses they incur if they temporarily house these pets," Bushby said. "We believe we can make this program self-sustaining through adoption fees and public donations."