

COVER STORY

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Photograph by Vicki Thompson

Bark Along: Elizabeth Laverty traded in her sports car for a Volvo station wagon, large enough for her growing family of dogs, and the license plate reads 3Chien, French for three dogs.

Doggone Best

Williamson and Laverty are a dog's best friend

By Alicia Upano

Willow Glen residents Kevin Williamson and Elizabeth Laverty may make a living in the tax accounting field, but it's at Humane Society Silicon Valley where they make a difference.

The couple is among nearly 700 volunteers who perform a bevy of tasks for the Humane Society, a nonprofit animal shelter that could not operate without its committed volunteer base. Yet even in this company, Williamson and Laverty stand out.

They began volunteering as dog socializers five years ago and can now be found nearly every weekend at adoption fairs at Petco in San Jose and driving throughout California to pick up and drop off animals with special needs at their own expense.

Laverty even appears on NBC 11's 7 a.m. broadcast every other Saturday to discuss some of the shelter animals' personalities and behavioral traits in hopes of finding the pet a "forever home" among NBC viewers. The animals are often showcased on the program.

She and Williamson will exercise the dogs before the broadcast so they are relaxed on the air. The couple has had a high success rate of getting those animals adopted.

For their work, the Humane Society Silicon Valley honored them at a National Volunteer Week recognition ceremony in April. The Junior League of San Jose also recognized the Willow Glen volunteers for their commitment.

"They really are our go-to volunteers when we need someone who can handle anything," says Elena Battles, the society's director of volunteer programs.

When Lisa Warden, the community adoption coordinator, requested volunteers for five off-site adoption fairs in July, Williamson and Kevin signed up for each event.

"A lot of people sign up for half, or two-thirds. No one signs up for all of them." Warden says. "To me, they're heaven-sent."

Lavery, an Iowa native, first became acquainted with the Humane Society 30 years ago when she moved to San Jose and took in a kitten from the shelter. She met Williamson through work, and the two have been married for 22 years.

The two had pet cats until Williamson developed an allergy. The couple found homes for the cats, but missed the pet companionship in their house. They began researching dogs, and after investigating different breeds, the couple settled on a cavalier king Charles spaniel named Bijou.

"He's everything that's best about the breed," Lavery says. "He's sweet, and kids come up and say, 'Oh, that's Lady' [from *Lady and the Tramp*]."

Having a dog changed their lives. They became more woven into the fabric of the dog-friendly Willow Glen community. Walking Bijou, they met other dog owners and children in the neighborhood. Lavery co-founded the Willow Glen Cavalier Club in 2002, and she and Bijou volunteered time in the Furry Friends Pet Assisted Therapy Services program.

Bijou made Williamson happy, he says, and lowered his stress level, helping to keep him physically healthy on their walks.

"When you walk in the door, you have somebody who comes up to greet you," he says. "Immediately, all the strain of the day and all the worry just disappears."

For Lavery, Bijou helped her fall in love with all dogs. Once Bijou became part of their lives, the couple decided to volunteer at Humane Society Silicon Valley instead of getting another canine companion. This way they could "play with lots of dogs all the time." It was also an opportunity to volunteer together.

They received training as dog socializers, learning to exercise and train dogs. They often took the dogs to Vasona Park in Los Gatos, or for a stroll down Lincoln Avenue, wearing vests that read, "I'm available. Are you?"

While Lavery and Williamson receive the satisfaction of working with dogs one-on-one, it's the owners-to-be that get the payoff of adopting a dog with good manners, Lavery says.

The Humane Society does not euthanize any animals in its adoption program, though it does take longer for older, larger dogs to find a home, says Laura Fulda, vice president of marketing and communications for the Humane Society Silicon Valley. The dogs at the society are a mix of strays and ones brought in by their owners.

The husband-and-wife team has bonded with many dogs, and though they didn't plan to adopt any more dogs, they couldn't resist the charms of Pepper, a 9-year-old German shepherd mix.

They also met Teddy, an older boxer that had been confined to the back yard for most of his life and had suffered a stroke.

"He didn't have a chance of being adopted," Lavery says.

Two years ago, after spending time with Teddy, Lavery told Williamson, "We can't put this poor dog back in the kennel; let's just take him home."

And that's what they did.

"Frankly we didn't think he had two weeks to live. It's been 2 1/2 years," Lavery says.

The pair brings this same devotion to saving all dogs. On one Thanksgiving weekend, a serviceman in Washington discovered his parents were going to euthanize his childhood dog while he was serving in the military. Humane Society Silicon Valley posted an announcement on its volunteer website, hoping someone could reunite the dog with its owner. Williamson and Lavery took the holiday to deliver the dog from San Jose to the man's home.

In another instance, rescued dogs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina received care at the humane society. The shelter dipped into its own funds to treat and transport the cats and dogs caught in the ravages of Hurricane Katrina. Williamson and Lavery pitched in their own dollars to send a few of animals back to their families in New Orleans.

All these efforts--from the long-distance transportation to Williamson wearing a dog hat and waving a sign on a street corner to lure prospective owners into an adoption fair--are a way of increasing the number of animals saved, Lavery says.

The couple says it's an investment in their community.

"There are so many happy endings here," Lavery says. "It's never sad when they go home because we're so careful about finding the right match."

Their commitment to animals is apparent down to the cars they drive. Williamson upgraded to a Chevrolet Tahoe, so that Bijou could sit beside his owners on the front seat bench. The truck is also large enough to transport animals to and from area rescue groups. Lavery once had a convertible with a license plate that read *Dingue*, French for crazy. Today, she drives through Willow Glen in a Volvo station wagon, large enough for her growing family of dogs, and the license plate reads *3Chien*, French for three dogs.

"We figure we'll be doing this for the rest of our lives," Lavery says.

To volunteer or adopt a pet at the Humane Society Silicon Valley, visit www.hssv.org or call 408.727.3383. Those who adopt an older pet through the Humane Society's Golden Pet program may receive discounts at affiliated Willow Glen-based business Gussied Up, 1310 Lincoln Ave.