

Animals get help during disasters

*Bayou Rescue, Red Cross
have partnered in project*

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Chapel Hill — The Orange County Chapter of the American Red Cross is partnering with Bayou Rescue to help animals caught in local emergencies.

Bayou Rescue is a nonprofit organization that started a few days after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in 2005. The storm dislocated thousands of people and their pets, and made clear to disaster-management groups that the rescue, relocation and safety of pets in a disaster had to be addressed.

The Orange County Red Cross had been searching for a group to help the pets of people who are forced out of their homes by a disaster. (Pets are not allowed in emergency shelters or in most of the motel rooms for which the Red Cross provides vouchers to families left homeless.)

In a sense, the Orange County Red Cross needed rescuing. That's when Bayou Rescue appeared on the scene.

Bayou Rescue was one of the local disaster action groups that helped families affected by Orange County house and apartment fires in recent months.

After a November Carrboro apartment complex fire, at least one frightened cat disappeared into the surrounding woods. A local resident, Lynn Turner, set and monitored humane traps for weeks after the fire. Phoebe, one of the cats was attracted to a trap, and Turner was able to return Phoebe to her guardian.

A few days after the fire, the Red Cross members and staff listened to Amber Alsobrooks give a talk about Bayou Rescue's mission and capabilities and the

partnership was created. The Red Cross' first request to Bayou Rescue was to assist other owners whose cats may have escaped during the Carrboro fire.

"In a local emergency, when we're called to a scene where pets are involved, we can contact Bayou Rescue, whose volunteers then come to the scene to aid the family and Orange County animal control staff," said Tim Bothe, director of emergency services for the Orange County chapter of the Red Cross.

After another apartment fire a few weeks later, the Red Cross asked Bayou Rescue to search for missing cats that had bolted from the scene. Traps were set and monitored by Bayou Rescue volunteers for weeks. One cat, Ducati, was waiting for his owners on his front porch one evening when they had been out with Bayou Rescue volunteers looking for their own cat and neighbors' lost pets.

In December, Bayou Rescue responded to two fires in a 24-hour period. The organization provided leashes, bowls, collars, toys, beds and food to two dogs made homeless with their human families in the first fire.

In another fire only a few hours later, three dogs were affected, along with their owner and her seven children. The eldest dog escaped from the fire but passed away minutes later. A friend of the family took in Sadie until the family could relocate, and Orange County Animal Services provided overnight care for Midnight. The next morning, Bayou Rescue coordinated vet care and foster placement for Midnight.

Response to Katrina

Alsobrooks said that Bayou Rescue began out of frustration t not being able to do anything to help the stranded, drowning and starving pets left behind by their owners in the flooded streets of New Orleans.

"Like so many people, my husband Dave

and I were watching the news and feeling helpless,” she said. “Through some contacts with Best Friends Animal Society, we sent an email to 10 people saying that we would like to work for a week and take some supplies. Next thing we knew, local families and businesses had donated a huge amount of supplies for us to transport.”

The Alsobrookses left North Carolina in a cargo van filled with the donated supplies, including gas cards for the rescue workers, leashes, pet food, litter, feeding bowls, vet supplies and insect repellent. Their destination was Tylertown, Miss., just west of Hattiesburg, where a five-acre staging area had been set up by Best Friends Animal Society.

Volunteers built fences and runs for rescued animals. They washed toxic waste from the fur of the animals, poured kibble in the hundreds of dog bowls, changed kitty litter and gently exercised dogs, some of which had been immobilized by the storm for two weeks.

“All I ate for the first few days was granola bars, crackers and sports drinks,” Alsobrooks recalled. “After a couple of days a Red Cross van pulled into the camp with hot meals for the volunteers. I remember being both grateful and amazed that this organization, which was already doing so much for so many storm victims, would also help those of us working for the animals. That first hot meal was quite a treat.”

After a week, the Alsobrookses returned to North Carolina to coordinate logistics for other people interested in volunteering. They stayed in touch with the animal rescue contacts they had met at other locations, and planned for transports of animals into local foster organizations. In early November, they took more donated supplies to Mississippi. Funding and in-kind donations were provided by almost 100 individuals, as well as local businesses.

The donations, in addition to the numerous

requests from animal rescue sites, made it obvious to the Alsobrookses that “there was a need for an organization that specializes in working with existing emergency management groups to help take care of animals that are affected by disasters.”

Before the end of 2005, they had incorporated Bayou Rescue, and they received their nonprofit 501c3 status the following year.

Their model of operations is similar to the Red Cross’. They are always ready to deploy to a disaster at a moment’s notice. If a call for help comes from the Red Cross, another animal welfare organization or the county’s emergency management, they can immediately provide teams for emergency rescue sites, collection and transportation of emergency pet supplies, aid with searching for and catching animals that have fled from the scene, and transportation of animals to safe foster and adoptive homes.

“Having Bayou Rescue come in on a disaster call allows our Disaster Action Teams to focus on our primary mission of providing disaster relief for our clients,” said Bothe. “If our clients are overwhelmed by the effect the disaster has had on their pets or being separated from their pets, our services may be affected. When the Red Cross and Bayou Rescue work together, the families are reassured about their pets’ safety and comfort, which makes everything a lot smoother.”