

PETCO Teams Up with Local Rabbit Rescue

By Nicole Rivard

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Six months ago someone dumped Rosie off in a cardboard box at the home of Linda Thibault, president of Hop-a-Long Hollow in Norwalk, a rabbit rescue comprised of a network of foster homes. When Thibault opened the box she became nauseous from the stench. The lop eared, orange colored bunny was emaciated and weak. She was urine scald on her belly from being unable to get out of her own excrement.. She had splay leg, a condition that causes the front legs to go out to the side forcing the chest to always be on the ground. She was so thin because her molars were overgrown and she couldn't eat properly.

"Basically she was living dead. I never saw anything like that in my life and I Hope I never do again," Thibault said.

The next day Thibault took Rosie to the South Wilton Veterinary Clinic, where Dr. Clare Fahy decided to treat her intensively for a week, even though her chances of surviving were slim. Rosie was placed on pain medication, antibiotics, soothing skin creams and force fed. Fahy ground down the molars, and in less than a week Rosie began to eat and move a tiny bit on her own. Surprisingly she made a full recovery.

"She is absolutely unbelievable. I call her our miracle," Thibault said.

Rosie has become the Hop-A-Long hollow's mascot. She and her "boyfriend" Jed, another rescue rabbit, appear on the organization's holiday

card. Up until recently the organization got publicity through Petfinder.com. But Hop-A-Long Hollow has partnered with PETCO on Westport Avenue in Norwalk to launch a pilot program where the pet supply company provides space to showcase the rescue bunnies.

At press time, Captain and Morgan, a pair of rabbits that had been dumped at a zoo, were already getting attention as shoppers passed by their habitat in the store. Hop-a-Long Hollow will have a grand opening event at PETCO on March 15. The event will also feature a bake-sale fundraiser.

Thibault pointed out that in addition to helping find rabbits homes where they aren't going to get dumped again, the goal of the partnership with PETCO is to educate the public on a much higher level on the proper care for their house rabbits.

"I had people bring me a bunny that they had kept in a birdcage. They didn't know any better. The muscles in his back legs had atrophied and I had to get him to walk again. They didn't realize what they were doing. They were totally uneducated. So our goal is teaching through PETCO," explained Thibault.

And with Easter around the corner, the timing is key.

"Easter is coming up. This is not a good time to go buy your child a baby bunny at a pet store. In all the publicity we do at this point we try to push that. People think baby bunnies are so cute. And they think they can live in a 10-gallon fish tank," Thibault said. "But they are not the kind of pocket pet they were considered to be for years. You can't confine a bunny inside a cage 24 hours a day. They need time to get out and play and exercise. Bunnies do something called binkying, which is a leap or a twirl in the air. They need to be able to do that."

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She also pointed out that rabbits are very social and they don't do well in outdoor hutches. "Rabbits actually have a life span of 12 to 14 years if well taken care of. A hutch rabbit has well under half of the normal life expectancy for being left outside. We push very hard that our adoptions are only to indoor homes," Thibault said.

"Unfortunately a lot of pet stores just sell baby rabbits, and they don't provide a lot of information."

For instance, potential rabbit owners may not realize how extremely delicate rabbits are. They are not physically like cats and dogs. And they are susceptible to many illnesses that the average vet does not know how to deal with. Among the ailments they are susceptible too are stress illnesses.

"You need to have a rabbit savvy vet. Essentially that means an exotic animal vet, so you are talking a higher cost to have them looked at," explained Thibault.

Spaying and neutering a rabbit is not only important to curb its hormonal behavior (lunging/spraying), which happens at about 4 to 6 months of age, but it also helps to increase their life span dramatically since the number one killer of rabbits over the age of 4 is ovarian and/or testicular cancer.

The number two killer of rabbits living indoors is gut-stasis, which the average person and average pet store has never heard of. Gut-stasis is a blockage that usually occurs from a poor diet not including hay. Hay is needed to keep fur moving through the intestines. It can also be brought on from high stress environments, such as dogs barking constantly. Adoption Criteria

The Hop-A-Long Hollow currently has 56 rabbits

available for adoption. All rabbits are spayed/neutered before going to their new homes. Thibault said she is "fussy" about who she adopts to. There is an adoption application process and she does check references. And she prefers the bunnies to be adopted in pairs.

"People are realizing that rabbits live longer and are much happier in pairs. But you can't just take a rabbit and put it in with another rabbit. There is a procedure called bonding, which is teaching them slowly to like each other. Once they are bonded it's a lifelong bond. If one dies, the other can die."

Hop-A-Long offers bonding services. The rescue often receives calls from people who have rabbits and would like to get them a friend. Thibault asks owners to bring their rabbit to the rescue and pick four or five bunnies that they might like to pair it with. Then they let the rabbit decide who he likes the most.

"We will do the bonding service for a \$25 fee. They can leave their rabbit with us for four days and Brandee LaCava, vice president of The Hop-A-Long Hollow, our bonding expert, will help them to get to know each other, or we will give them instructions and they can try it at home." The Truth about Bunnies

Thibault said what surprises people the most about rabbits is they are litter box trainable, very social and amazingly smarter than anyone gives them credit for. Plus they have amazing personalities. And carrots are actually bad for rabbits because they are high in carbohydrates. A tiny amount is ok for a treat, but it's really the green leaves at the top of the carrot that are nutritious for rabbits. "If you think about it logically wild rabbits will eat the green tops that grow above the ground. They don't dig for carrots," Thibault said.

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If you would like to get more tips like this don't miss the Hop-A-Long's grand opening at PETCO on March 15 from 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Visitors can also find out about volunteer opportunities at Hop-A-Long Hollow.

"We've got wonderful volunteers. I can't give them enough credit," said Thibault. Volunteers will also be caring for and maintaining the rabbits showcased at PETCO on a daily basis.

"We are always looking for people to clean cages and to come and pet rabbits that are aggressive and teach them that not all humans are bad. Some of them have had bad experiences with humans. That can be turned around," she said, adding that people are also needed to provide foster homes or do fundraising.

She admits that Hop-A-Long Hollow has always been lucky because donations seem to come in when the organization needs them the most. Thibault said that there is a huge need for this type of rescue in the area and that she typically turns away 10 rabbits a week. She acknowledged that Norwalk has another rabbit rescue called Rabbit Allies.

"They do a wonderful job. That's how I got into this. They had done a huge rescue and I agreed to foster a couple rabbits for them. I realized they couldn't do this alone," said Thibault, about starting her own non-profit rescue.

"I would love nothing more than for Hop-A-Long Hollow to grow into a real facility where we have a shelter but it would take a benefactor. It's finding the right person. I have high hopes that someday it will happen."

For information or to sponsor a bunny, visit www.hopalonghollow.org. The organization is also

having a fundraiser at the Westport Humane Society March 22. For information, call 227-4137.

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