

Scholars Helping Collars Scholarship Essay

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The surgery packs are wrapped tightly and sterilized properly. The small pile of them, no less than ten, are stacked up in neat little piles- surely done by the hands of an anxious student trying to keep busy. Tote bags full of nail clippers, ear cleaning solution, and various brushes sit proudly by the door, ready to be taken to the shelter the next morning. The students themselves, about twenty or so, bustle around their laboratory, chattering excitedly and anxiously about what the next day has in store for them- the day they'd travel to the local animal shelter to assist in the spay and neuter clinic. For most of the aspiring veterinary assistants and technicians, this would be their first time tackling a real-world veterinary experience, and for all of them, this would be a pure and unadulterated dive into very real and very intimate issues that face the field. The rose-colored glasses would finally be ripped off, and the sick puppies and wounded kittens would no longer be the only picture on the poster for jobs in the veterinary field. This volunteer experience allows for serious and pressing issues, such as overpopulation and animal mistreatment, to be brought to these student's realities, which is a life changing experience that few opportunities can provide.

For roughly three years, I've travelled to the Cumberland Valley Animal Shelter to assist with tasks that need done around the shelter and to help with the spay/neuter clinic that the shelter offers once a month. The shelter, which is almost always full of stray and unwanted cats, mistreated dogs, and surrendered pocket pets, is a harsh reality in comparison to the Veterinary Assisting Program my classmates and I attend. While we don't ignore problems such as overpopulation or animal abuse by any means, it's one thing to just talk about the effects in lecture- at the animal shelter, these problems are in every corner of the building. From the

fundraising efforts done every week to support the cost of caring for these animals to the overabundance of the animals themselves, the animal shelter is living, breathing proof that the veterinary world is not all sunshine and rainbows. Our younger classmates do everything in their power to raise awareness for these animals, as well as groom and socialize them when we visit- anything to raise the odds of them finding their Forever Homes, as my class likes to call them. When there is such an overabundance of strays, especially cats, in the shelter, it's nearly impossible for the caring and loyal staff to get to every single one of them every single day, and that's just the reality of the situation. By the entirety of my class visiting at once, we're able to give these animals the love they so desperately crave, as well as promote their adoptions around our communities.

The older students in the class directly help with the spay and neuter clinic, which I believe is the hardest pill to swallow in the veterinary community. There are just too many cats for our communities to handle. This is a problem that my volunteer experience has undoubtedly exposed me to, and for that reason alone I can say that the experience has been worthwhile and life changing. Seeing the disastrous effects of negligent owners has ignited a deep passion for the issue, and I wouldn't trade this volunteerism for anything because of it. The spay and neuter clinic is full of cats, both owned and strays, that can be fixed at the shelter for a lower price than usual, which is our way of both getting income for the shelter and promoting the spaying/neutering of your pets. Far too many reckless owners have adopted cats, only to turn around and release the intact pets to the wild to fend for themselves and breed even more homeless cats. These owners typically release their pets due to their own negligence, an inability to care for their pets financially, or just through carelessness, but despite the reasons for their actions, the consequences are always equally ruinous. And I get to witness those consequences

every month at this clinic. I see stray, pregnant kittens- so young that they'd die during birth if they weren't spayed during their pregnancy. I see five grey toms come in, and I know that statistically, not all of them will get homes, and we'll be forced to euthanize the remaining ones due to a lack of room. I see a mother come in with six, seven kittens and I know that there are no more spots available, and I can't help but feel a burning anger for the owner that most likely adopted that mother as a kitten, only to release her three months later, intact and already tamed.

Before my volunteer experience, I believed as many others would believe about animal welfare- we should treat animals kindly and with respect. But after seeing firsthand how humans can directly impact the future, or lack thereof, of pets they're responsible for, I see that animal welfare is so much more than that. An animal's welfare is something that we *owe* them. If we take in an animal as a part of our family, then we owe it to them to provide them with the best quality of life as we are capable of- and if you can't provide that for them, then you shouldn't take them in in the first place. An animal has just as much a right to happiness as us, and the importance of this main concept was never as apparent to me as when I saw it directly invalidated and ignored. Sometimes, by seeing the ugly in the world, you can fight harder for the change necessary to end it, and this experience has taught me both some necessary skills for the veterinary field, as well as a stronger passion to succeed in it.

