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Woman leaves corporate world to advocate for abused dogs in Chicago

Former human resources worker retrains and resocializes animals in job with Safe Humane Chicago

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Kathleen "Kat" Budrean once worked in human resources, but she grew tired of having to deal with the egos of the back-biting executives and managers she coached to become better bosses.

She realized she didn't have much of a filter — what came up tended to come out.

"My first manager was wonderful, and every time I'd think, 'How could you not get this?' or 'This is so ridiculous,' she would coach me on how to be (more diplomatic)," said Budrean, 41, laughing.

She left human resources in 2009 and began volunteering as a court advocate for abused and neglected dogs. Many of these animals had been holed up at the city's crowded Animal Care and Control facility, waiting in cages — sometimes for years — as the cases of the people who abused them wound through the court system.

The animals, the majority of them pit bull terrier-types, are considered evidence and are cared for as such at the pound until the owners either win their cases and get their animals back, relinquish their rights or the judge takes those rights away.

"When animals are evidence, they don't come out of their cage until they become the property of the city," Budrean said. "It's like tampering with evidence. So (early on) we found dogs that had been locked up for years. They were fed. The cages were cleaned, but they lived in the cages."

In 2010, she took a part-time job as the court case dog program specialist with Safe Humane Chicago, an anti-violence group that focuses on the well-being of victimized animals.

In this job, Budrean trains and socializes dogs that can make the transition from life in the pound to life on the outside. She and her team work only with dogs that are no longer considered evidence.

Among her early cases were three dogs, Tweedle, Monkey and Token, all pit bull mixes whose owner was charged with cruelty and neglect. The dogs were impounded in 2008 when they were 8 weeks old. By the time they met Budrean, they had been living in their cages for two years.

"I remember taking one of the dogs out and videotaping him," she said. "The dog was afraid of the garbage can and he pancaked (flattened himself out) onto the floor. He was so traumatized he'd sniff something and back away. Some dogs, we have to take them out slowly and go only so far each day and then return them to the cage and try again the next day."

But then there are exceptions — like Bruno, another pit bull mix.

He was 3 months old when his owner was walking with him down the street and a police officer saw the owner brutally kicking Bruno. The officer arrested the owner, and Bruno was taken to the pound.

When Budrean met Bruno, he had been living there for more than a year.

"But he came out of the cage with his tail wagging, and he wanted to snuggle," she said. "It goes back to the resiliency of the animal. There's a socialization period, from birth to 6 months, and if they miss out on that, things can go wrong."

"But Bruno came out happy like he'd just gotten there — like he'd never been beaten or caged — like he'd just been born."

Budrean said that prior to Safe Humane Chicago's advocacy work, dogs lived in cages for years on end without being socialized. Many couldn't make the transition out and had to be euthanized. In the past, less than 10 percent of the dogs were saved, she said. Now about 50 percent survive.

Since 2010, Budrean and her team have worked with about 185 dogs — getting them ready for new homes. About 150 have been adopted. The remainder are in rescue or foster homes or no-kill shelters.

Budrean told me that people sometimes fail to recognize that confined animals lack the mental stimulation needed to thrive.

"We think a dog only needs space to run," she said. "But dogs look to us for guidance. They're smart and they want to be taught to sit, or walk on a leash, or to bring back a ball. Dogs go crazy if they're left in cages for a long period of time. They're starving to know, 'What do you want me to do?'"

She said the 2007 Michael Vick dog-fighting case raised the profile of animal abuse and gave her hope that these cases would be taken more seriously. And she believes she's found her calling working with dogs. (She also runs a foster program that allows her to find homes not only for dogs and cats, but sometimes chickens, bunnies and the random duck.)

She said advocating on behalf of animals is something she's been doing since she was a teen.

"When I was young I wrote letters to lawyers and state representatives pushing for changes in laws, or asking them to uphold laws in animal cruelty cases," Budrean said. "I would say, 'Here's the law and here's the penalty and I hope you strongly consider the maximum sentencing along with counseling.'"

"I pushed counseling because people who abuse animals have been known to abuse people, so this really does affect all of us."

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