

Rescue MISSION

Fighting for abandoned animals is *House* doctor **Lisa Edelstein's** pet cause

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Can you identify an exact experience that made you who you are today? Actor Lisa Edelstein, who plays Dr. Lisa Cuddy on the hit series *House M.D.* after high-profile turns in *Seinfeld*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Felicity*, can pinpoint when she became an advocate for animals. Especially, she says, for household pets that are so often dumped—and frequently “put down” when no one claims them—in shelters all across the country.

“I was 11 and my family adopted a cat,” she tells WebMD. “And it turned out the cat was pregnant. I was there for the birth of her kittens. I helped raise them until they were old enough to be adopted. My dad, who’s a pediatrician, found homes for them because we couldn’t care for them all. The poor mother cried for her babies, but I told myself we were doing what was best for them—until I learned a short time later every single one of those kittens had died through the irresponsibility of those who’d adopted them.”

She sighs. “I was just devastated. And I guess that’s when I first got interested in this.”

“This” is her passion for animal rescue in general, and Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, specifically. Based in Utah, Best Friends houses between 1,700 and 2,000 dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, and even horses that have been discarded, abused, or both, delivered from shelters across the country that could no longer keep them.

A leading force in the no-kill shelter movement, its efforts have helped reduce American shelter killings from an astounding high of 17 million dogs and cats per year in the mid-1980s to 5 million annually today. Working through a network of Best Friends affiliates—including in Los Angeles, where Edelstein, a vegetarian for 28 years, gives her time—the group’s ambitious mis-

sion is to bring that number down to zero through neutering and spaying programs, adoption drives, and education.

“I find it amazing there are so many people out there—although it is getting better—who treat their pets like possessions they can simply get rid of, as opposed to living, breathing creatures that are totally dependent on us,” says Edelstein.

Edelstein has since rescued four “mutts.” The first three, Sandwich, Bumpa, and Wolf E. lived long lives before succumbing to old age and illness. Edelstein nursed them through kidney failure, pancreatic cancer, and eye surgeries. She now lives with Shazam!, a young schnauzer/poodle mix, and a black and white cat, Bug, 18.

After enduring trauma, many rescue animals have behavioral quirks that range from

relieving themselves where they shouldn’t (inside the house for dogs, outside the litter box for cats) to aggression problems. Edelstein sought out animal trainer Cesar Millan (of *Dog Whisperer* fame) to help her work out Wolf E.’s bad habits—and her own.

“Wolf E. got attacked a lot when I’d take the dogs out,” says Edelstein. “Cesar taught me so much. It was me who wasn’t doing what I was supposed to be doing—I wasn’t bringing stability to my pack. But when I stayed out front and led and reacted calmly to new dogs approaching, Wolf E. and the others stayed calm, too.”

Even with the extra TLC some shelter animals need, Edelstein is first to declare how much she’s gained from her rescued pets. “It’s incredible. They’ve given me far more than I’ve given them.” ■

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