

# A DOG'S LIFE

In Thousand Oaks, a pop-up pet store offers animals from the Ventura County Animal Shelter a second chance. **MARYANN HAMMERS** reports on Shelter Hope.

**Want to get your heart broken?** Stroll through the Camarillo Animal Shelter, where hundreds of penned dogs and caged cats wait to be rescued. Many are strays that have scrounged and struggled most of their sad lives. Others, including many purebreds, were family pets, abandoned or relinquished by their owners.

The lucky ones will find a forever home. But it takes a hard heart to not break for the rest.

Almost two-thirds of all cats and nearly one-third of all dogs at the Camarillo Shelter are destroyed, according to Ventura County Animal Services. In 2010, 2,183 cats and 2,060 dogs were euthanized. And it's not just dogs and cats: In 2010, nearly 300 domestic rabbits ended up at the Camarillo shelter.

But now, pound puppies and bunnies have a new lease on life, thanks to a one-of-a-kind weekend store at Janss Marketplace in Thousand Oaks.

Shelter Hope Pet Shop is a cheerful place of playful dogs, adorable puppies, and sweet bunnies. Every Friday morning, 20 to 30 shelter dogs are picked up from Camarillo and brought here, in hopes they'll be adopted. With its soft beds, warm blankets, and smiling visitors, it's hard to believe this is a satellite branch of the county shelter.

"When you look in these shelter animals' eyes, you see they are just looking for love," says animal advocate Kim Sill, who came up with the idea for Shelter Hope. "If we can't get more people to the shelter, we wanted to bring the shelter to the people."

People who can't stomach going to the pound will love dropping in at Shelter Hope. It resembles a high-end pet boutique, including a retail area stocked with new pet beds, blankets, doggie clothing, and other pet items, all for sale, with proceeds going back to the animals. Bright animal-themed artwork, photographs, and portraits hang on the wall. They're for sale, too, as are the handcrafted bird feeders.

How much is that doggy in the window? The price is identical to the county shelter: For 125 dollars, you get a best buddy, already spayed or neutered, vaccinated and microchipped, plus a free health exam at any veterinarian in Ventura County. (For pets over

five years old, or owners 65 and older, adoption price is 60 dollars.)

Tucked between Golds Gym and the Conejo Art Museum in a space donated by property-management company NewMark Merrill, the shop is staffed by volunteers who feed, cuddle, socialize, and play with the pups. Scott Mazzarano, a volunteer, greeted visitors one afternoon. "Welcome to the Zen Pen," he joked, while standing in a white-picket fence enclosure of bouncing chihuahuas. He introduces them, one by one: No Name, Elmo, Tanner, Foley, Roxy. And the littlest guy wearing a pale blue sweater? That's Paco.

Why so many chihuahuas? It's because it's the number-one breed that ends up stuck in Ventura County shelters—more than 1,700 were impounded last year. "A lot of owners don't realize that chihuahuas are not accessories," says Shelter Hope store manager Dani Caouette. "People make an impulse purchase, without thinking it through. These are living animals and need care. This is an addition to your family and a commitment that could live eighteen years."

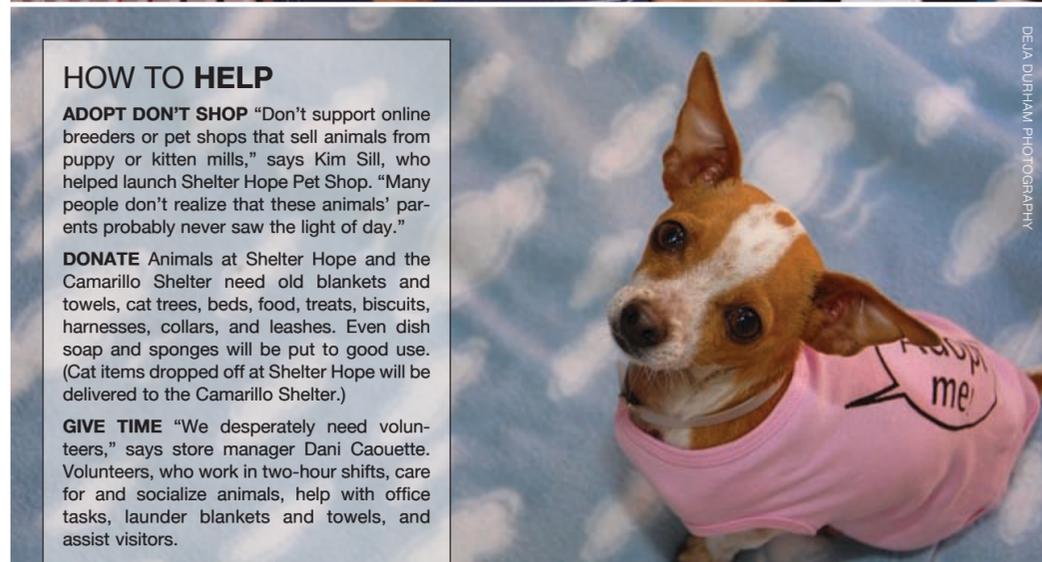
A bunny habitat, full of homeless domestic rabbits, takes up a corner of the store. "Bunnies are intelligent animals and can be trained to be great pets," says Caouette. "But they are *not* Easter gifts."

In the back room, a volunteer trims and shampoos a shih tzu's matted fur. What a difference a hairdo makes! "Shelter dogs are really good dogs," Caouette says. "But they don't look and smell their best. When you bathe and groom them and put them in this posh atmosphere, they shine."

The toughest, saddest part of her job, Coette says, is Sunday night—when she has to return the dogs that didn't get adopted to the county shelter. She tries to not think about that, and instead focuses on the successes: The shop placed 64 dogs and twelve bunnies during its first six weekends of operation.

Still, with more money or manpower, they could help lots more animals. "If we had more volunteers and funding," Caouette says, "we could be open every day—and have a room for cats." ■

More information online at [shelterhopepetshop.org](http://shelterhopepetshop.org).



## HOW TO HELP

**ADOPT DON'T SHOP** "Don't support online breeders or pet shops that sell animals from puppy or kitten mills," says Kim Sill, who helped launch Shelter Hope Pet Shop. "Many people don't realize that these animals' parents probably never saw the light of day."

**DONATE** Animals at Shelter Hope and the Camarillo Shelter need old blankets and towels, cat trees, beds, food, treats, biscuits, harnesses, collars, and leashes. Even dish soap and sponges will be put to good use. (Cat items dropped off at Shelter Hope will be delivered to the Camarillo Shelter.)

**GIVE TIME** "We desperately need volunteers," says store manager Dani Caouette. Volunteers, who work in two-hour shifts, care for and socialize animals, help with office tasks, launder blankets and towels, and assist visitors.

Left, top to bottom: Ribbon cutting ceremony on opening day; actor James Marsden; Paco the chihuahua, irresistible.

This page: A volunteer at Shelter Hope, and a couple very compelling arguments in favor of adoption.