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Fired From a Shelter After Photographing the Animals

By ANNA JANE GROSSMAN NOVEMBER 8, 2011



Richard Perry/The New York Times Emily Tanen, with two of her dogs, said she was fired from Animal Care and Control of New York City for violating the group's policy on photographing animals.

Photography was not part of Emily Tanen's job description at the Manhattan branch of Animal Care and Control of New York City. But soon after she started working there in August 2009, she began taking photos of animals who were scheduled to be euthanized.

Her photos, she said, were an effort to attract the interest of adopters and rescue groups.

She mostly photographed pit bulls: Freckles, black with pink skin around her eyes, wearing a striped scarf; Spot, a white puppy, getting his chest scratched; and Harlem, skinny and brindled, paws draped over a volunteer's elbow.

But her photos violated the group's strict policy on taking images of animals, which dictates who can take photos, how the animals can be photographed and how the images can be used. One rule prohibits showing humans in the photos.

As a result, Ms. Tanen said, she was fired in May.

"I knew they hated me," she said. "But I thought that even if I was a pain, they'd suck it up. Because I was doing a really good job."

Ms. Tanen said rescue groups often told her that her photos persuaded them to take animals they otherwise might not have. "I still remember Domino's photo — the first pit bull we pulled from Manhattan," said Jay Lombard, a founder of Dog Habitat Rescue in Brooklyn. "He was within 12 hours of being destroyed when Emily snapped a photo of him and attached it to an e-mail. That image hit me hard and I couldn't turn away."

Care and Control officials would not comment on Ms. Tanen's departure, saying that they do not discuss personnel matters.

Ms. Tanen, 30, had previously worked at a no-kill shelter in Miami and operates her own small nonprofit rescue group. She was hired to be a liaison between Care and Control and the roughly 150 rescue groups that take animals from city shelters.

When she started working at Care and Control, Ms. Tanen said, she believed that the animals were photographed poorly and that the images failed to convey the warmth of a potential pet.

With her art background from her studies, Ms. Tanen decided she could do a better job with her \$1,500 Nikon.

As at most city shelters, Care and Control's charges arrive from the street, or are brought in by owners unwilling or unable to keep them. Others are abandoned or seized from abusive homes. The luckiest — the healthiest ones with the least significant behavioral issues — are deemed eligible for adoption. Some appeared on the group's Web site.

"AC&C works hard to find loving and permanent homes to as many animals as possible each year," said Richard Gentles, a spokesman for Care and Control.

Of the nearly 31,500 animals, mostly cats and dogs, taken in by Animal Care and Control between September 2010 and last month, 65 percent were adopted and 25 percent were euthanized, according to data from the group's Web site. (Many of the rest were returned to their owners.)

Mr. Gentles said the group does devote time and care to the photographs.

"We have a strong volunteer group that does a great job taking photos and writing bios for the animals every day," he said.



PetFinder.com. Bottom: Mark Ross; Emily Tanen At top, photographs of dogs taken in by Animal Care and Control of New York City, which euthanizes about 25 percent of animals it rescues. Bottom left, photos taken by Mark Ross, a volunteer, and Emily Tanen, who says she was fired by Care and Control for ignoring guidelines like including humans in photos of shelter dogs.

The images of animals being put up for adoption also appear on another Web site, PetFinder.com. “Animal Care and Control of New York City has always been proactive about posting pet photos and descriptions online in order to give each adoptable pet his best chance at finding an adoptive home,” said Kim Saunders, vice president of shelter outreach at PetFinder.com. “This is a monumental task for an organization handling such a large number of pets. We applaud their efforts, including the use of brightly colored photo backgrounds designed to make the pets’ photos ‘pop’ for viewers.”

But some critics believe that the group has not focused on the quality of the photos, which they say can mean the difference between life and death for certain animals.

Esther Koslow, a former volunteer at Care and Control and a founder of Shelter Reform Action Committee, a coalition of animal advocates that has been critical of Care and Control, said she left the group because she believed animals were not presented to the public quickly or well enough.

“Time is of the essence,” Ms. Koslow said. “The ones who are able to maybe make it out need to be presented to the world in the best way possible. A good bio and photo that goes out can save an animal. But there are usually maybe three part-time volunteers taking photos in the whole city.”

Although Animal Care and Control has managed to reduce its euthanasia rate, critics say too many animals are still dying in the group’s care.

“Animals are often euthanized for kennel cough, which is treatable for like 10 bucks, and most of them get kennel cough right away,” explained Rachel Hirschfeld, a founder of the New York County Lawyers Association’s Animal Law Committee. She said that animals were euthanized for treatable problems because the facilities are overcrowded, underfinanced and pressed to create vacancies for new animals.

Mark Ross, a former professional architecture photographer, started volunteering at Care and Control’s Manhattan facility in 2008. He posted his photos on a Facebook page.

“I heard all the time: ‘Your photo was the deciding factor for me. I saw that cat and I had to have it,’” he said. “I was trying to create images that showed loneliness and despair. I wanted people to see that these are lovely, living beings.” The standard intake pictures “make them look like inmates,” he said.

Last November, Mr. Ross, 66, left his volunteer post after a change in volunteer policy stipulating that Care and Control would own all photos he had taken and any future ones. “They began disallowing photos to be used in any way without their permission,” he said. “I knew I was giving up on the animals, but I couldn’t put up with the humans.”

Ms. Tanen said she tried to comply with the rules, but sometimes felt her judgment trumped her superiors’. She continued to show people’s hands touching a dog, even after receiving a warning against doing so. “I think they just didn’t want photos of animals that they were about to kill looking cute and adoptable and happy with people, but they said it was because their research showed that photos with people didn’t encourage people to adopt,” she said.

Ms. Tanen said that she was encouraged to stop taking photos altogether. “My boss at the time was like, ‘You don’t have do that; it’s not part of your job,’” she said. “They told me it was a waste of time.”