

## **PET TALK: She avoided shelters, then couldn't turn away**

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**By BARBARA McLEAN**

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Like many people, Sharon Blechinger did not want to go to a shelter to get a dog. She felt that if she didn't see the conditions there, they couldn't hurt her. So when she and her husband decided their Rottweiler named Blitz needed a companion, she sent her husband to the San Bernardino City Shelter.

Before bringing home a dog, he insisted Sharon see the dog first -- and when she met Betty it was love at first sight. What she didn't love was seeing so many homeless dogs and, like Betty, many "red-lined" or marked for euthanasia.

For the past seven years, Blechinger has held fundraisers that benefited the San Bernardino Police Department's canine program at her restaurant, Mexican Café. Thanks to her efforts, they have been able to fund the four canine officers who serve the city.

After meeting Betty, she knew she had to do more. She founded Helping Every Animal League -- HEAL -- in 2009 to raise much-needed funds for the city shelter.

"I became acutely aware that there was no other organization helping this shelter," she said.

To date, HEAL has raised funds that have provided vaccinations for every dog that goes through the shelter. Through a \$50,000 grant HEAL received from the Heigl Foundation, 760 dogs were spayed or neutered last year at no charge to their owners and the group just received another \$50,000 grant from the same foundation.

In addition, the Heigl Foundation funded the vehicle that has transported more than 1,550 dogs to states that have no-kill shelters and can provide new homes. Transports continue each month and the nine HEAL board members work tirelessly with the shelter to find more ways to help the homeless pets.

Betty, who was the inspiration for this great success story, now faces her own uphill battle. A few weeks ago a tumor was found on one of Betty's back legs and according to her vet at California Veterinary Specialists in Murrieta there is an 80 percent chance it is bone cancer.

From someone who avoided shelters, Blechinger has certainly changed her perspective and that, in turn, has saved the lives of many dogs. Anyone

who knows her realizes the pain she's experiencing as her own dog faces a grave illness, and yet she continues to work hard on the behalf of others. Read more about HEAL at [www.friendsofheal.org](http://www.friendsofheal.org).