

Readin', 'Ritin', and Rabbits

College combats bunny overpopulation with a TNR/adoption program

BY JAMES HETTINGER

Long Beach City College isn't the hoppin' place it used to be—and that's good news.

Once, the community college south of Los Angeles teemed with hundreds of abandoned pet rabbits and their offspring. Dropping them off on campus had become a misguided local tradition dating back 30 years or more, says Jacqué Olson, an administrative assistant for the dean of physical education and athletics. Local residents would typically drive into a parking lot near some bushes, open the car door, and dump out their unwanted rabbit—a practice that Olson points out is not only inhumane but against the law in California, punishable by a \$500 fine and up to six months in jail.

The college traditionally receives an influx each spring shortly after Easter, Olson says. Families get a cute, cuddly bunny for the holiday and suddenly realize that rabbits can require nearly as much work as a dog or cat. Children and parents quickly lose interest in

cleaning the rabbit cage every day, so they opt to drop the bunnies at the college.

"They think it's like a Disneyland for rabbits, because it's a green campus, and there's lots of open spaces, and they think rabbits want to run free," Olson says. "They don't look at it from the rabbits' point of view—that the rabbits struggle to find shelter, and they struggle to find food, and if it weren't for a few employees on campus putting out feeding and watering stations, those rabbits would starve to death."

Olson began rescuing and finding new homes for the rabbits on her own about 10 years ago, but the problem persisted, reaching an estimated 300 rabbits.

"They were everywhere," says Donna Prindle, a professor in the physical education department who started helping Olson about a year ago. An extensive renovation of the campus made the rabbits more visible to predators such as hawks and owls. It forced them out of their usual dwelling spots and into some inappropriate places, including the athletic fields. One bunny was found making her burrow behind the softball field's home plate.

In 2009, Olson and Prindle approached the administration about finding a humane solution, and the college formed a rabbit task force. Prindle contacted the Utah-based Best Friends Animal Society, which suggested an innovative approach: a trap-neuter-return (TNR) program, similar to the strategy frequently used for feral cats.

Best Friends helped connect the college with the veterinary school at nearby Western University of Health Sciences. The Western University mobile veterinary unit, staffed by four full-time vets and about 15 student volunteers, came to Long Beach in March 2010 for a two-day spay/neuter event that resulted in sterilization surgeries for 83 rabbits rounded up largely by Olson and Prindle. "It was an incredible event because these people were so organized, and so meticulous, and so



Rabbits—like the one shown here mingling with some art students—have long been a part of the picture at Long Beach City College in California.

dedicated to what they were doing," Olson says. "We just kind of stood in the background and watched it all happen."

Diane McClure, a veterinarian and associate professor at Western University, says she savors one compliment in particular from the Long Beach City College participants. "They said, 'We're amazed at your students, because it was a really long day,' and they said the last rabbit got the same care as the first rabbit."

The team returned in May and performed surgeries on another 75 rabbits. More recently, Olson and Prindle have been gathering groups of about 10 rabbits and taking them to the university every few weeks for spay/neuter surgeries.

Debby Widolf, rabbit department manager for Best Friends and a volunteer at the college's first spay/neuter event, says the level of organization was amazing—with



Jacqué Olson, an administrative assistant at Long Beach City College, works in a former carpentry department building that serves as a temporary holding area for spayed and neutered rabbits awaiting adoption. Olson has cared for and rescued rabbits on campus for years, and pushed for a humane solution to the overpopulation.

each rabbit given a physical before the surgery, and a post-surgery area where students held the bunnies on heating pads. "It was really sweet," she says. "There wasn't anything at all cavalier about bringing in these rabbits and caring for them and making sure that they had what they needed."

Rabbits don't always get that kind of respect, Widolf notes. Because they're so plentiful, they're often viewed as disposable, which leads to the kind of problem found at the college, and has caused them to become the third-most-euthanized animal in shelters. "Spaying and neutering is definitely one of the answers for them," she says. "I think that when shelters offer clinics to spay and neuter dogs and cats, they just really need to include rabbits, too."

Trap, Neuter ... Adopt

The ongoing construction at Long Beach City College—which is removing some of the buildings under which the rabbits lived, and paving new parking lots—makes it impossible to release all the rabbits back onto the campus, Olson explains. The college, which is replanting the landscaping the rabbits have eaten, and filling the holes they've dug, doesn't really want the rabbits on campus; the facilities department redirected a \$10,000 facilities improvement grant to cover spay/neuter expenses. "And we don't really want the rabbits on campus, either, because

it's not a safe place for them," she adds, citing the threat of predators.

So a former carpentry building on campus, stocked with cages donated by Best Friends, has been converted to a "rabbit recovery area" housing bunnies awaiting adoption. Olson says many of the rabbits—including those born on campus—never really become wild and remain highly adoptable. "They are sweet and gentle and affectionate. And because we've been handling them on a daily basis—we pick them up and take them out of the cage, clean their cage and put them back in, and hold them and love them—they love us. They love people." Unlike feral cats, she adds, the rabbits are friendly and easy to handle.

To promote adoptions, the project's organizers have placed a notice on the school's website, asked local churches to post a flier, and worked with the Bunny Bunch, a local rescue group. Olson admits the adoptions are going slower than she'd like, but says she still has avenues to explore. The goal was to adopt out all the available rabbits by the end of 2010.

Olson and Prindle say the impact is noticeable: As of mid-September, about 140 rabbits had been adopted out, 40 had been spayed or neutered and returned to the campus, and 80 remained in the recovery center. Olson estimates that the number of unsterilized rabbits at large on campus has dwindled to 20 or 25.



A mobile veterinary unit from nearby Western University of Health Sciences has visited Long Beach City College to help spay and neuter rabbits. Faculty members or graduate veterinarians perform the surgeries, assisted by students. Working the spay/neuter event last March, left to right, are veterinary technician Luann Manley and veterinarians David Forster and Marc Togneri.

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"I think we've changed the idea that this is a bunny sanctuary," Prindle says. She credits the media attention the first spay/neuter roundup received (which ranged from local TV to *The Wall Street Journal*), as well as the signs posted on campus to notify people of the potential \$500 fine. "We have very few drop-offs right now, which is a huge improvement."

Olson agrees. "When Donna and I walk around campus ... we don't see any more baby bunnies, which tells us that the spay and neuter [and] release is working." The rabbits she does spot often have an ear tattoo indicating they've been spayed or neutered, she adds. "And those rabbits are happier because they're not popping out babies every 28 days." 