



The back corner

Common App personal statement · animal shelter

BEFORE · 376 WORDS

Ever since I was a little kid, I have loved animals. When I turned fifteen, I finally became old enough to volunteer at the Hall County Animal Shelter, and it has changed my life in ways I never expected.

At first, my job was mostly cleaning. I scrubbed kennels, did laundry, and refilled water bowls. It was not glamorous work, but I did it with a positive attitude because I knew it was helping the animals. Over time, the staff began to trust me with more responsibility, and eventually I was allowed to help with adoption events.

Working at the shelter taught me many valuable lessons. The most important lesson I learned was patience. Some dogs are scared of people because of what they have been through, and you cannot rush them. There was one dog, a pit bull mix named Rosie, who had been at the shelter for fourteen months. Most volunteers skipped her kennel because she would not come to the front. I decided I would not give up on her. I visited her every Saturday, and eventually she started to trust me. That experience showed me that patience and persistence really do pay off.

I also learned about organization and leadership. The shelter did not have a good system for keeping track of which dogs had been walked each day, so I made a binder to fix it. The staff liked my idea and still uses it today. This taught me that even a teenager can make a difference if they are willing to step up.

Additionally, volunteering has taught me about compassion and empathy. Seeing animals who have been neglected made me realize how lucky I am, and it made me want to help others. I have learned to appreciate the little things in life, like a wagging tail or a dog finally eating out of your hand.

In conclusion, volunteering at the animal shelter has shaped who I am today. It taught me patience, leadership, compassion, and hard work. These are qualities I will carry with me to college and beyond. I hope to continue volunteering in college and someday become a veterinarian, so that I can keep making a difference in the lives of animals who cannot speak for themselves.

The first thing I learned at the Hall County Animal Shelter was how to be boring.

I was fifteen, and my job was kennels. Scrub, rinse, laundry, water bowls, repeat. Nobody hands a new volunteer a leash. For two months the only dogs I touched were the ones that came to the front of the cage on their own.

Rosie never came to the front. She was a pit bull mix, fourteen months in the same kennel, and the volunteer list worked the way lists do: people took the dogs who made them feel good at the job. Rosie stayed in the back corner with her shoulder against the wall, and most Saturdays her card stayed on the hook.

So I started sitting outside her kennel. Not talking to her, not reaching in. I would finish the water bowls and then sit on the concrete with my back against the bars for ten minutes, which is a long time when nothing is happening. For most of a month, nothing happened. The seventh Saturday, she moved from the corner to the middle of the kennel and lay down. Six weeks after that, she put her nose against my hand.

I want to be careful here, because the version of this story I used to tell had me saving her. I didn't. I was the only person willing to be bored in front of her long enough for her to decide I wasn't a threat. That is a much smaller thing than rescue, and it is the part I have thought about most.

What I did next was less interesting and probably more useful. The shelter had no reliable way of knowing which dogs had been walked on a given day, which meant the loud ones got walked three times and the quiet ones got missed. So I made a binder: one page per dog, one line per day, initials in the box. It is the least impressive thing I have ever built. The staff still uses it, and the dogs in the back corner get walked now whether or not anyone finds them rewarding.

I still work Saturdays. I clean kennels, and I help at adoption events, where I am good at exactly one thing: telling a family the truth about a dog they have already decided they like. Rosie was adopted in March, fourteen months and two weeks after she arrived. I wasn't there. Someone texted me a picture of her in the back of a Honda.

I want to be a veterinarian. Not because I love animals — everyone at that shelter loves animals, and it is the least useful thing we have in common — but because the animals who need the most attention are usually the ones who are hardest to pay attention to. As far as I can tell, medicine has the same problem. The patient in the back corner is still the patient.

I'm not in a hurry about it. I've gotten good at sitting there.