

The Right Place. The Right Time. The Right Person For The Job.

Photographs and Text by Anna Cooke

The pig's name was **Bacon** and he was about to be sprung from his cell at Hernando County Animal Services, under unusual circumstances. Two people would be bidding against each other for Bacon — one, a vegetarian who wanted to rename him Tofu — the other, a carnivore who could care less whether or not the pig had a name at all.

Animal services picked up the six-month-old pig, who had been found wandering too far from any farms. Dina Athanassie, a longtime animal welfare advocate, was at the county shelter on official business as Executive Director of **Humane Society of the Nature Coast**. When she came face to face with Bacon, she stepped out of her role as Executive Director and said she wanted to adopt Bacon. Her plan for the pig, after changing his name to Tofu, would be to find a sanctuary where he could safely live out the rest of his life. There was one hitch to Athanassie's plan. Pigs, considered livestock, are not adoptable. Bacon's only way out of the county shelter was on the public auction block. Athanassie found herself competing with a man who made it clear he had only one thing in mind for Bacon.

Amused, the man played along with the bidding war. He must have assumed he was dealing with a bleeding heart part-time animal lover who would quickly tire of the game and walk away. It turns out, when the bid hit \$110, he threw up his hands and declared, "I'm done. That pig's not worth it," walking away without his Bacon and obviously no longer amused.

Athanassie paid for the pig using her own money, then made a few phone calls. Tofu, now known as Leonidas, is living the good life at **Rooterville Animal Sanctuary** in Melrose, Florida.

We first met Dina a few years ago during the **Dog Days**

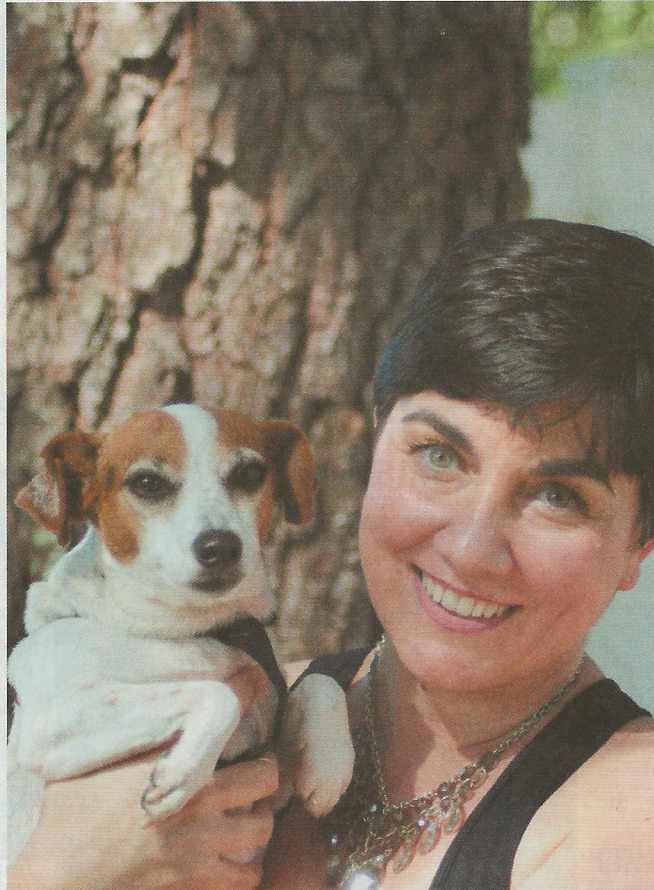
event at **Trinity Regional Rehab Center**. She was volunteering for the Florida branch of **Boston Terrier Rescue of Tennessee**. She adopted **Reggie**, a Boston Terrier, after fostering him.

She served on the board of directors for **Florida Voices for Animals** and was one of several people instrumental in creating the annual Tampa Bay Veg Fest. She has traveled to Washington, D.C. to lobby for stronger animal protection laws and has made presentations on animal issues ranging from factory farming to vivisection.

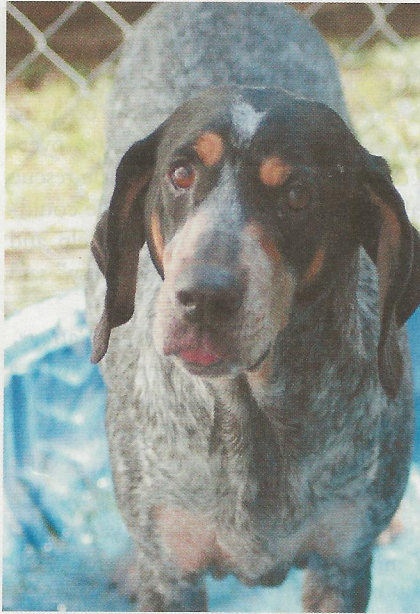
In May 2014, The Humane Society of the United States hosted their annual Animal Care Expo in Daytona Beach. Dina attended, saw a job posting for the Humane Society of the Nature Coast executive director position and emailed an inquiry. Several board members happened to be attending the Expo as well, when they responded to Dina's inquiry. When everyone realized they were all at the Expo, a preliminary interview was set up and conducted on the spot. Athanassie was hired soon thereafter, assuming the duties held for 11

years by Joanne Schoch, who retired in February 2014.

Founded in 1964, the Humane Society of the Nature Coast is a small, no-kill shelter doing big things. One of the first items on Dina's to-do list, after becoming Executive Director, was to convince the board to look at how to expand their reach beyond Hernando County. That, and to have a more people-friendly walkway to the adoption kennels installed. She immediately noticed how the property, which slopes down, flooded whenever it rained. Without a well-constructed walkway, the conditions made it difficult for visitors, as well as for volunteers exercising the shelter dogs.



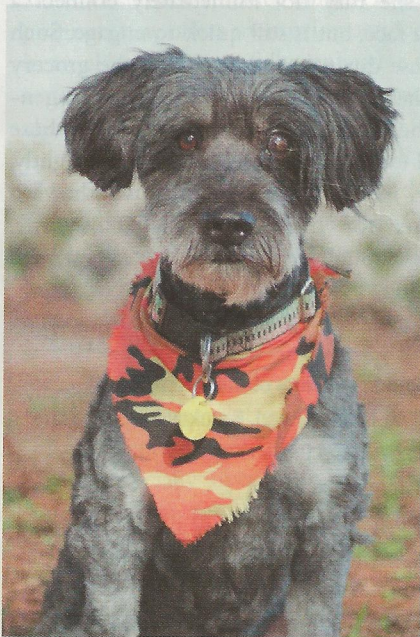
Dina Athanassie, Executive Director of Humane Society of the Nature Coast with Astro, an eight-year-old Jack Russell Terrier mix, available for adoption.



Adoptable: Lucy is a three-year-old Blue Tick Hound mix, pulled from Hernando County Animal Services.

While the shelter does not go beyond state lines to bring in adoptable dogs and cats, they are now reaching beyond their county line. When Levy County Animal Services is filled beyond capacity, they contact Athanassie for assistance. She also makes it a point to call on Hillsborough County Animal Services when visiting Tampa, which is usually several times a month.

(Continued on following page.) 🐕



Adoptable: Tiger is an eight-year-old Schnauzer mix, pulled from Hillsborough County Animal Services.

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Huckleberry was found emaciated in the woods of northern Florida. He was transferred from Animal Control of West Florida in Chipley to the Humane Society



of the Nature Coast (HSNC) where he was adopted. When his new adopter brought him for obedience training, the instructor recommended Huck for search and rescue training. Huck and his owner, Steve Oates, are now involved with **Boondocks K9 Search and Rescue** out of Sumterville, Florida. The volunteer organization provides services to the Red Cross and FEMA nationwide.

Leroy was micro-chipped, and that made all the difference. When two women found a Shih Tzu wandering along busy Spring Hill Drive in Hernando County, they



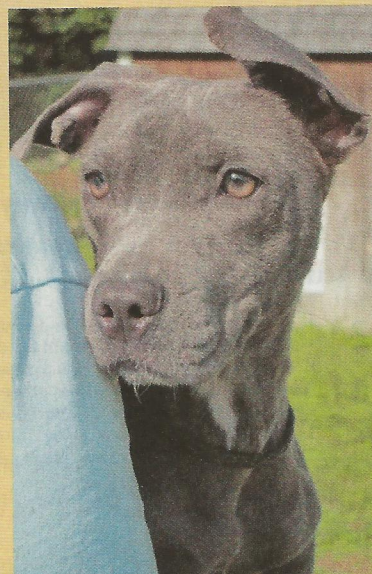
scooped him up and delivered him to the shelter to get him out of harm's way. "We scanned him

for a microchip, which showed his owner lived two hours away in Marion County," said Athanassie. "When we contacted the owner, she told us that her dog had been missing for more than six months. She had already had the heart-breaking conversation with her granddaughter that Leroy was gone forever. Had he not been microchipped, that very well could have been the case. This serves as a reminder of the importance of keeping information on microchips up-to-date."

Zuli came to the shelter via Hernando County Animal Services. She arrived scared and



very uncomfortable. She had a severe case of Demodex, a type of mange, with thickened skin and significant hair loss. With the help of the shelter staff, she transformed from a scared pup in pain to a happy puppy with a tail that never stopped wagging. She was adopted by a couple.



The Right Place...continued from previous page.

With only 12 kennel spaces for dogs, moving adoptables expeditiously is essential in order to make room for more dogs from the state's overcrowded county shelters. That's where the rescue groups really help make a difference. "We couldn't do what we're doing without the help and resources of our rescue group community," said Dina.

In addition to the facility's **Cat Cottage**, which may house up to 60 cats and kittens at a time, adoptable cats are also available at local area pet businesses within Hernando County.

There are plans to build a newer, larger shelter on property currently owned by the Shelter. However, those plans are a couple of years and a couple of million dollars away from being realized.

"We hope to eventually use that land, but right now we are looking at adding on to this property," said Athanassie. Immediate plans call for a new cat compound at the existing facility. Groundbreaking is scheduled for early 2016.

"Dina has a strong history as a vocal proponent for animal welfare, which is what we've always promoted," said Lisa Judge, Humane Society of the Nature Coast president.

Athanassie's responsibilities include fundraising, event planning, community outreach and communications. Educating the public about the community's continuing need to support the shelter's efforts, means getting out and meeting new people, which she obviously loves doing. On occasion, she may not immediately connect a name to a face, but is still quick to engage. Such was the case during a recent trip to the grocery store. As she was walking up to say hello to a gentleman she knew she recognized, but whose name had escaped her, he turned his head slightly, jarring her memory. It was the man who had bid against her for Bacon, the pig. This time, Athanassie thought it best not to engage, and kept walking. 🐾



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7200 Mobley Road, Brooksville.
352.796.2711
HumaneRescue.org

Rooterville Animal Sanctuary, 5579 Darwood Street, Melrose, Florida
Email: piggyparade@aol.com; Call 386.661.2287
Rooterville.org
Boston Rescue of Florida - BostonRescueFlorida.org