

Family Spotlight

a l o c a l f a m i l y g u i d e



Pet prep

Is your family ready
to adopt an animal?

Also inside:

- Volunteering amid virus
- Hidden Villa goes virtual



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Local experts weigh in on factors families should consider before adopting a pet.

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The pandemic has reduced volunteer opportunities, but there are still ways to help.



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Hidden Villa has found creative and safe ways to teach kids about farm life amid the pandemic.

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Have a story idea for one of our magazines?

Email editor Bruce Barton at
bruceb@latc.com.

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Cover photo: A girl meets a goat at Hidden Villa, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHOTO BY MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER

A fur-ever home

What families should know before adopting a pet during the pandemic

By Mary Larsen
Staff Writer/maryl@latc.com

With the family working

and studying at home, and vacations pretty much on hold, the pandemic-induced lockdown may seem like the perfect time for an addition – of the four-legged variety – to the household.

While those in the business of animal rescues, adoptions and care are definitely pro-pet, they remind families that adopting an animal is a long-term commitment and that pets deserve a “forever home.” If people adopt now, they need to be ready to transition to a post-pandemic scenario that includes more time away from home and, potentially, away from the pet.

In the time of COVID

The pandemic has led to a dwindling supply of adoptable pets, according to Pets In Need CEO Al Mollica, whose nonprofit runs shelters in Palo Alto and Redwood City.

Mollica said that while there has been a huge rise in requests to adopt, they don’t have as many animals as they used to.

“The shelter’s basically empty,” he said. “We haven’t done rescue runs in a month or so because of the pandemic.”

In normal times, he added, Pets In Need conducts rescue runs all over the area. Shelter operations managers check all of the shelters and come up with a “euthanasia list” of animals that will be euthanized if not rescued.

Janet Alexander, outreach coordinator for the Silicon Valley Animal Control Authority (SVACA), said that while they’ve not experienced an increase in animal intake during the pandemic, dogs and cats have been adopted at a much faster rate with so many people working from home.

“It might be one of the few upsides to the pandemic, because so many people suddenly have the time for a new family member,” she said. “We also saw an overwhelming number of families wanting to foster animals during shelter-in-place.”

Kate Levin, who works in public relations for Pets In Need, said that during the pandemic, her organization too has had “an incredible response from foster volunteers willing to take animals into their homes for short periods.”

The pandemic also has had an impact on veterinary ser-



COURTESY OF PETS IN NEED

Omar Jimenez of Pets In Need feeds Sadie while Buddy watches.

vices. Dr. Thomas Hansen, a veterinarian at Adobe Animal Hospital in Los Altos, noted that veterinary hospitals have seen an unprecedented spike in caseload over the past year.

“There are probably a lot of reasons for this,” he said in an email, “ranging from having more disposable income to put toward veterinary visits (due to a lack of travel and normal activities), to spending more time at home and noticing abnormalities that would otherwise be missed, to an increase in adoptions.”

Finding the right fit

Part of the Pets In Need adoption process involves spending a lot of time talking to families about what they’re looking for in a companion. In a small apartment, Mollica explained, a larger dog might lead to problems and will need to be taken out frequently for walks.

“Are you prepared to do that? We don’t beat around the bush – the last thing we want is for the match to be a bad match,” he said. “We have really capable trained staff who know what questions to ask and have a good sense about each of the animals they’re adopting. Sometimes people are disappointed – they have their heart set on a particular dog, or cat or rabbit, and have to be told no.”

Alexander advised potential pet adopters to do their homework.

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“Dogs have different activity levels,” she said. “How many hours are you away from home? How active are you? Do you love to run or hike? Are you a couch potato? All these things factor in when you’re in search of a best buddy. Cats need a bit less maintenance and don’t mind being left alone during the day but will still demand attention when you’re home.”

Saving kittens and large dogs

Pets In Need launched its Cause for Big Paws program last year to save more large dogs.

“A year or so ago, we saw the number of animals in shelters on the euthanasia list was diminishing, but what was not diminishing was the number of kittens and large dogs, 35 pounds or over – that was increasing,” Mollica said. “We’re trying to save more kittens – three to four weeks and younger in particular – and large dogs.”

The shelter also is trying to help the “power breeds” – pit bulls in particular – which he said have gotten a bad rap.

Levin added, “We continue to need more people to adopt and foster large-breed dogs. If we can lessen the amount of time these big guys are staying with us in the shelter, we can rescue even more at-risk animals.”

Hansen said something else to consider is whether there

are already pets in the household. Integrating a new pet “can be successful in most cases,” he said, “but some current pets will have variable tolerance levels toward a new roommate.”

Another factor is the family’s lifestyle. While most people are spending a lot of time at home during the pandemic, the situation likely will start to change in the coming months. Busy families may opt for a lower-maintenance animal, such as a cat.

In terms of dogs, families should consider the role they’d like the pet to take on, ranging from a running or workout partner to a mellow lap dog. Breed and age can both influence energy level and behavior.

“From a practical/size sense, a Great Dane might not be a good choice for a very small apartment,” Hansen cautioned. “There are also breeds that tend to need more attention and activity than others. Puppies and kittens are always very popular, but they can need quite a bit more time



COURTESY OF SVACA

SVACA volunteer Brooklyn Alexander holds kitten Murphy.



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and attention when it comes to training, especially puppies. Young or older adult options can be a good choice because their personalities are more established.”

If allergies are a factor, Hansen said people can consider hairless or low-shedding breeds and dogs with certain types of hair. Some options are basenjis, certain terriers (Bedlington, Wire Fox, Yorkshire) and poodles.

Many people are allergic to cats, but Hansen said there is a diet available now for cats that can help reduce their allergen levels. A cat vaccine in the works will have a similar effect.

In addition to lifestyle and living conditions, there are financial considerations. Hansen recommends people consider pet health insurance, especially for catastrophic or emergency coverage.

“Having a pet is a great joy but also a lifelong responsibility and privilege,” he said. “People can sometimes be surprised by the care requirements ... but also the cost, particularly when it comes to emergency care.”

Alexander stressed that while consideration should be given to long-term care, training, food and medical cost, people need to understand they are making a lifetime commitment to an animal.

“Of course, it goes without saying that everyone should consider adopting from an animal shelter,” she said. “The relatively small adoption fee includes spay/neuter

surgery, a microchip, vaccines, a vet check and more. The best part is that you can give your new best friend a second chance at life – not to mention what they give back in terms of love, companionship and enjoyment.”

Pets in post-pandemic times

Asked about advice for pet owners once things get back to normal – when families aren’t home as much – Mollica said it was a big concern.

“Think about the animal’s well-being,” he advised. “To go from almost 24/7 around family to almost nothing, that would be a hardship, and the animal might have trouble adjusting. Be mindful of that, and factor that into the transition process.”

Alexander agreed about considering the pet’s needs post-pandemic.

“Certainly, there should be a contingency plan in place for when we all return to a normal work schedule,” she said. “Could that include hiring a dog walker or dropping a dog off at day care a few times a week? Or just devoting an hour or two in the morning or the evening for exercise and one on one?”

Due to the pandemic, both Pets In Need and SVACA currently have virtual adoption processes. To adopt an animal and for more information, visit petsinneed.org or svaca.com. ♦

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Helping hand

Ways to support the community in the time of the coronavirus

By Audrey Chang
Town Crier Editorial Intern

Volunteering is at the heart of many local nonprofit organizations, which often rely on those willing to give their time and resources back to the community. However, the coronavirus pandemic has diminished or at least altered most service opportunities.

Organizations that typically count on a large number of volunteers – such as Grassroots Ecology, the Los Altos History Museum, the Santa Clara County Library District, the Peninsula Humane Society, the Stanford Blood Center and Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital – are currently not doing so due to COVID-19. While that makes it more difficult to find volunteer opportunities, they do exist.

Following is a list of organizations that are recruiting



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VOLUNTEERING

both virtual and in-person volunteers. In-person volunteers must wear masks and practice social distancing.

Community Services Agency

CSA provides vital social services for residents of Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Altos Hills by delivering food from local markets to distribution centers, distributing bags of groceries to seniors and handing out donated food. Volunteer times vary by activity; opportunities are available weekdays. Minimum age for volunteers is 18.

To volunteer and for more information, email clark@csacares.org or visit csacares.org.

GreenTown Los Altos

GreenTown encourages sustainable lifestyles and promotes a healthy planet by engaging volunteers to serve on its marketing and program management teams. GreenTown seeks a graphic artist to modernize the organization's media and marketing. Volunteers can expect to spend 10 hours total on projects. There is no minimum age to volunteer.

For more information, email Connie Miller at cmiller1119@gmail.com.

GreenTown also seeks program managers for its Lunch with GreenTown environmental speaker series, its 500 Trees campaign to plant 500 trees locally and its GreenTown Summer Internship program. Volunteers can expect to spend three hours per week for one to three months. Minimum age for volunteers is 17.

To volunteer and for more information, email Gary Hedden at gary@greentownlosaltos.org.

Habitat for Humanity East Bay/Silicon Valley

Habitat for Humanity supports affordable and sustainable housing solutions by assisting operations at a Habitat for Humanity ReStore or constructing emergency interim housing at its Evans Lane site in San Jose. Construction, which supports families experiencing homelessness, is scheduled 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays (full-shift commitment required). Habitat for Humanity ReStores are retail outlets and donation centers that resell new and gently used home goods; proceeds support building community housing. Volunteers organize retail inventory, test and clean hardware products and unload donations from trucks, among other operational activities. Volunteer times vary by location and require shifts of four to seven and a half hours. Minimum age for volunteers is 16.

To volunteer and for more information, visit eastbay.volunteerhub.com or habitatebsv.org.

La Comida de California

Volunteers at La Comida de California serve hot, boxed lunches to Palo Alto seniors as part of the Santa Clara County Senior Nutrition Program. Volunteer times vary by location; shifts range from 60 to 90 minutes. Food is served weekdays; volunteers may fill as many time slots per week as desired. There is no minimum age for volunteers.

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To volunteer and for more information, email lacomidavolunteer@gmail.com or visit lacomida.org.

Learning Ally

Learning Ally's mission is to unlock student potential through improved literacy. Volunteers create education solutions and support struggling students by narrating audiobooks, conducting audiobook quality assurance and helping with audio and video editing, educator outreach and engagement. There is no minimum age for volunteers.

To complete a volunteer interest form and for more information, visit learningally.org.

Midpeninsula Community Media Center

The Palo Alto-based Midpeninsula Community Media Center provides digital media resources and training to the public. Volunteers can serve as a studio crew member or field videographer, contribute to the Immigrant Stories Project or assist with operations. Those with prior studio experience may start volunteering immediately, while novices must attend a studio basics course. Volunteer time varies by project and individual interest, ranging from 30 minutes to 10 hours per week. Minimum age for volunteers is 16.

To complete a volunteer form and for more information, visit midpenmedia.org.

Museum of American Heritage

Volunteers at Palo Alto's Museum of American Heritage showcase the history of scientific technological innovation by virtually researching artifacts to add artifact descriptions to the museum's collection database or create information cards for objects on display. The time commitment is flexible. There is no minimum age for volunteers.

To volunteer and for more information, email admin@moah.org.

Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County seeks volunteers to help slow the transmission of COVID-19 by conducting contact tracing to identify people who have contracted or may have been exposed to the virus. The minimum age for volunteers is 18.

To complete a volunteer form and for more information, visit sccgov.org/icanhelp.

Second Harvest of Silicon Valley

Second Harvest helps fight local hunger by distributing nutritious groceries in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Volunteers deliver food to homes, distribute food at community sites and sort donated food. More than 500 volunteer opportunities and events are available on the nonprofit's website. Volunteers sign up for three- to four-hour shifts on weekdays. The minimum age for volunteers is 14.

To volunteer and for more information, visit shfb.org. ♦



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Outdoors and online

Hidden Villa engages families with virtual classes, socially distanced hikes

By Nina Crofts
Town Crier Editorial Intern

Since the 1920s, Hidden Villa in Los Altos Hills has been a hub for wildlife education and exposure to the natural world, inviting schools, families and other members of the public to explore its farm, garden and trails.

When the pandemic hit, the Hidden Villa staff had to find ways to connect visitors with nature while keeping them safe.

In June, Hidden Villa switched to a reservations-based system, with the hope that a phased approach would bring a return to normalcy. While other parks may face the complications of visitor limitations, the online reservation system employed by Hidden Villa aims to ensure social distancing



MEGAN V. WINSLOW/TOWN CRIER FILE PHOTO

Children meet a goat at Hidden Villa, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.



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to keep staff and visitors safe, along with the capability of doing contact tracing, if necessary.

Safety remains priority No. 1

These days, Hidden Villa doesn't sound the same, either.

"The first thing folks notice is how quiet it is on the ranch," said Marc Sidel, Hidden Villa's deputy director of development. "The typical 'music' of Hidden Villa is still full of chirping birds, bleating sheep, croaking frogs and buzzing bees; what's missing right now are the gleeful sounds of students on school field trips."

Visits are limited to two hours, and some parts of the park are closed and certain trails are now one-way.

"Our main challenge has been keeping as much of Hidden Villa accessible while also ensuring that safety remains the top priority," Sidel said.

At first, Hidden Villa only allowed volunteers and season-pass holders to visit, he added. After state and county guidelines were updated, the preserve opened to the general public and "continued to increase visitation by extending hours and increasing the maximum number of people allowed without compromising safety," Sidel said. "We also reopened with access limited to our trails but have since opened up most of the animal areas and the education garden."

On top of visits, Hidden Villa has provided an educa-

tional space for local elementary students to visit and experience nature together. With most schools only offering distance learning, preserve staff scrambled to find a way to provide a virtual experience.

"We realized that a huge audience that we were going to be unable to serve in person this year was our school community," said Nicky Crummett, Hidden Villa's senior director of programs. "Ordinarily, our teacher team would see tens of thousands of schoolchildren here onsite for field trips."

Live from Hidden Villa

As an alternative to in-person field trips, the staff last fall launched Hidden Villa Live, 45-minute Zoom sessions for students and other local residents. The interactive events give participants a virtual look at the farm. Aimed at students in grades K-5, the sessions include "The Three R's, Garden Style: Reuse, Renew, and Recycle" and "We're All Connected: The Great Web of Life."

"We wanted to be able to continue to provide a service to that audience and also support the teachers, because we know that this has been an incredibly challenging time for folks," Crummett said. "We thought we could bring a virtual experience, a field trip to Hidden Villa in which you can hear the sheep meeting, you can watch the cow get milk

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EDUCATION

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from his mother, see the worms that work in the garden.”

Crummett described the live sessions as “a joyous interlude to a typical day.”

In addition, the live sessions meet each grade level's Next Generation Science Standards.

“We have the most amazing classroom in which there’s 1,500 acres of Santa Cruz Mountain wilderness, intersecting with 150 acres of operational or organic farming,” Crummett said. “We really want to highlight everything that exists within that, all the way from the natural environmental systems to the systems that support actually getting food onto our table.”

What's next

According to Crummett, Hidden Villa hopes to bring in families in March for “YES – Your EdVenture Space” tours that focus on the wilderness component of the farm for two-hour sessions in groups of up to 10, when the county is hopefully in the less-threatening orange or yellow tier of the county’s COVID framework.

At the same time, staff plan to pilot a similar cohort program with students, bringing together stable groups once a week for four weeks to experience the farm and all it has to offer.

To register for a visit or program and for more information on Hidden Villa, visit hiddenvilla.org. ♦

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A close-up photograph of a woman and a young girl. The woman is in the foreground, smiling broadly, showing her teeth. She has dark hair and is wearing a white top. The young girl is behind her, also smiling, with her head resting against the woman's neck. She is also wearing a white top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

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