

Lessons Learned—Or Not?

by Ruth McCambridge

Editors' note: As anyone who has read the *Nonprofit Quarterly* for any length of time knows, we take your suggestions seriously. In a recent survey, a reader suggested the following as a new feature, and we loved the idea. If you have real-life stories to contribute to this new column on nonprofit snafus and lessons learned, submit them at editor@nonprofitquarterly.com. While the following story is true, names have been changed to protect the innocent and embarrassed.

THE BOARD MEMBERS OF A LARGELY volunteer animal shelter considered themselves lucky when they replaced Dean Jasper, the former executive director and founder of this small organization, at a salary within the organization's means. Miranda Spicer had recently moved to the area and was a longtime volunteer in animal rescue groups in the state from which she moved. She had experience in the financial management operation of a large human-services organization. Board members fell in love because, frankly, under Jasper, record keeping and workflow had been lax.

After the interview, they offered Spicer the job immediately and shared a self-congratulatory moment on their good judgment. The shelter was headed for a brand-new day.

But three days into Ms. Spicer's tenure, the entire organization was reaching for the eject button.

On Spicer's first day, she identified two dogs who had been at the shelter

for more than three years and who were "unadoptable" because they were biters: a pit bull and a basset hound. Neither had bitten anyone at the shelter, but both were considered too aggressive to safely adopt out.

Spicer knew that this was a no-kill shelter but that this designation had a caveat for "unmanageable and untreatable" dogs, so she had them euthanized a few days later to free up space.

The next day, the organization was scheduled to have a "community" meeting, including the board and volunteers, most of whom had walked, fed, and loved these two dogs for years. All hell broke loose. Many community members were angry; some were crying. A few days later, after an executive meeting of the board, Spicer was asked for her resignation. A story ran in the local paper and memorialized the dogs as old friends of the shelter. An angry but new-in-town Spicer tried desperately to disappear into the town's woodwork.

The shelter asked Jasper to return

even half-time, and other volunteers helped with administrative tasks.

Lessons Learned—or Not?

For incoming executive directors, it is important to understand the spoken and unspoken culture and guiding principles of the group you agree to lead. If you don't know, ask, for cripes' sake! The euthanized dogs were still at the shelter for a reason. In organizational terms, they were "artifacts" of the group's belief system.

For hiring boards, it is always tempting to grasp for the polar opposite of a former executive who was considered inadequate. "Finally!" you say, "someone who knows the value of systems and efficiency!" This approach is a bad way to go and exhibits a certain naiveté. Take yourselves seriously. You may need to make some changes, but what do you hold sacred in your own work? Have you taken the time to explore these things explicitly among your staff and with candidates?

RUTH MCCAMBRIDGE is the *Nonprofit Quarterly's* editor in chief.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 160302.