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HEADLINE: In a Makeover Contest, Shelter Hopes for Space

Source Website

By JENNIFER V. HUGHES

IN the cattery at the Voorhees Animal Orphanage about 75 cats live in steel cages, packed into a small room.

"I'd really like to have a common cat room where our kitties can roam free," said Maria Clarke, executive director of the shelter, which cares for an additional 125 cats as well as 74 dogs.

Because of a contest run by a new Web site, Mrs. Clarke's hopes may become reality. The Web site, zootoo.com, is holding a \$1 million shelter-makeover contest, and the Voorhees facility is in the running for the top prize along with about 1,000 other shelters nationwide.

Web site visitors earn points for their favorite shelter by reviewing products and services, posting photographs or commenting on pet news items. Out of the top 20 shelters with the most points, one will be chosen for the big prize while the rest will receive a cash donation.

The contest ends March 31, and the Voorhees Animal Orphanage was listed at No. 11 on Wednesday. About 1,000 animals are adopted annually, but if the shelter wins money to build a common cat area, Mrs. Clarke said, it could find homes for more cats.

About 80 shelters in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut are vying for the makeover, and their rankings change every day as their supporters log on. Like pet shelters everywhere, these tend to be nonprofit organizations that rely on private donations.

"Shelters are struggling in many cases just to provide for their daily expenses," said Kim Intino, director of animal sheltering issues for the Humane Society of the United States, adding that at least six million dogs and cats enter shelters nationwide every year.

Zootoo.com, based in Secaucus and started in October, was founded by Richard Thompson, former chief executive of Meow Mix. There are plenty of pet Web sites available for animal lovers — from Yahoo message boards about every kind of pet, to Petcentric.com, sponsored by Purina. Mr. Thompson said he created this one because he wanted to offer everything from groomer reviews to lists of pet friendly hotels; from cute-pet contests to message boards.

"I would argue that pet owners are more passionate about their pets than parents are about their babies," said Mr. Thompson, whose own cats, Simba and Nala, came from a shelter. "Babies go off to college eventually and cost you a lot of money while the cat or dog will still lick your face when you come home drunk."

He is supporting the site solely on his earnings from the sale of Meow Mix, which he sold for \$720 million in 2006. He estimated he has spent about \$5 million so far on the Web site. He said he plans to assist pet rescue groups next.

Zootoo.com, which has no advertising, has 125,000 registered users and seven million monthly page views.

The Voorhees shelter may be near the top because of people like Janene Hill, who heard about the contest and quickly spread the word to family and friends, school, community and scouting groups. She has racked up more than 8,800 points for the shelter.

"I love animals," said Mrs. Hill. "It's a terrible looking place but they are so good to the animals."

The contest prompted Rachel Sammis to get involved for the Danbury Animal Welfare Society, which was No. 58. Rachel, 17, is publicizing the shelter contest as part of a required service project at Woodland Regional High School in Beacon Falls, Conn.

"The people there are really devoted to finding a loving forever home for the animals," she said.

At the Little Shelter in Huntington, N.Y., the office manager, Jodi Record, said she would like to build a medical center so animals can be treated on-site, instead of being transported to other vets.

The shelter, founded in 1927, houses about 350 cats and 65 dogs, maintains 28 feral cat colonies and has an upstate sanctuary for unadoptable dogs.

Ms. Record said the contest is providing the shelter with much needed exposure. It was No. 5 Wednesday.

"We've had a great response," she said. "We have a few volunteers who are on the Web site every night."

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Highlights: zootoo.com, Zootoo.com