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Critters help Seattle Humane Society's Brenda Barnette find bliss

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - by [Patti Payne](#) Contributing Writer

Brenda Barnette adores animals. In fact, they are her life.

As CEO of the nonprofit **Humane Society for Seattle/King County**, headquartered in Bellevue, Barnette is surrounded by about 150 dogs, 300 cats, and any number of rabbits, gerbils and other animals.

And then she heads home to Shoreline each night to enjoy her six dogs and two old cats.

"There's Picasso, the Chihuahua mix, and five toy poodles, most of them rescue dogs," she says, ticking off their names. "Stella, Fanny, Bimi, Hannah and Mimi." The cats are Gabby and Sasha.

Her daughter lives with two water dogs in a basement apartment of Barnette's home.

Working and living with animals is Barnette's bliss.

"My idea of a good time is to have all my dogs running around with me all the time," she says. "I was an only child and I like a lot of little companions around me."

Until recently, weekends meant packing up all the critters in an RV and taking them on trips. Now, a 30-foot boat has replaced the RV.

"They like the boat," she says. "Just like the RV, they see me start packing and they get really excited."

Barnette says she likes to interact with her animals and to also sit back and watch the interaction between them.

At the helm of the state's largest private animal shelter, Barnette has a chance to see lots of that interaction. She has made significant changes in the nonprofit during the two years she has been there.

"I came in and looked around and found things were run down," she says. "We were keeping the animals clean and fed and vaccinated, but then the board authorized us to spend more money to help achieve our mission.

"So now we've upgraded our cat and dog facilities, the animals are getting cleaned and handled more and being given much more attention. We are definitely on the right track with an enrichment program to help them thrive."

And Barnette has helped foster some interesting and unusual classes at the shelter, including the



Photo: Dan Schlatter

Humane Society of Seattle/King County CEO Brenda Barnette likes to take some of her menagerie, including (from left) Stella, Bimi, Fanny and Picasso, for outings on her boat, which is moored at Lake Union.

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latest, billed as "the first ever kitten kindergarten in the state," where kittens are trained to come when called, to sit and fetch.

"Cats may be underrated by people who have never lived with one," she says. "They may truly be the smartest animals. In fact, cats are so intelligent that they have convinced many people that they are totally untrainable."

But, she insists, that's not the case.

"You can clicker-train kittens -- teach them agility just like you can teach dogs to do agility," she says. "If you have an active and curious cat, one who will chase a laser beam, that cat is easy to train."

Barnette says in the 20 years she has worked in animal welfare organizations, she has learned much.

"Animals are great teachers," she says. "I have seen them transform the life of a fearful child, by being patient and winning her over. I've seen some holding back a little in the shelters, but still there's a twinkle in their eyes. They don't give up hope."

Mainly, she says, she has learned how to forgive from watching animals: "They themselves are so forgiving. They don't hold grudges like people. They don't pout like people. They are always there for you, and they do not get caught up in what isn't important at all."

PLPAYNE@MSN.COM | 206.876.5500

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