

Q&A With 'Animal Planet Heroes: Phoenix'

Discover what really happens behind the scenes of Animal Planet's popular TV show.

Andrea Bravo

Photo courtesy of Animal Planet Andy Starr is an emergency animal medical technician with the Arizona Humane Society and one of the stars of "Animal Planet Heroes: Phoenix." He has worked in the animal welfare field since 2002 and shares his home with two dogs, Fox and Skippy, and four cats.

What is a typical day like on the job?

We are available 365 days a year. A day consists of responding to calls we receive, securing the animals, treating them as necessary on the scene, and bringing them back to the hospital. We are extremely busy, responding to nearly 18,000 calls annually.

What are the most common cases involving dogs that you deal with?

Many of our calls involve dogs who have been hit by cars or are in some form of heat stress. Both situations have wide-ranging degrees of severity. Some dogs we rescue who are hit by cars have little or no injuries from the accident, while others are unfortunately killed by the collision or the resulting injuries.

Also, some of the dogs in heat stress are fine and only have a slightly elevated temperature, while other dogs are either comatose, experience seizures, or have passed away. These are the reasons why we strive to respond as quickly as possible – time can mean the difference between life and death for many of the animals we rescue.

What's the most rewarding part of what you do?

The most rewarding part of what we do is knowing that we make a difference and save the lives of thousands of animals each year. The feeling you get when you find an animal who is injured or sick and get them off the side of the road, offer them treatment, see them get better, and find them a home is indescribable.

Any memorable moments?

Of course there are many cases that have stuck with me. One in particular was when we received a call that a dog had been hit by a car on one of the largest, busiest streets in Phoenix. I responded and found a little 3-month-old female pit bull puppy lying in the grass on the side of the road. The person who called us was waiting with the puppy and told me the puppy had followed him to the bus stop. The puppy had run into the middle of traffic and was hit by a passing car, which did not stop. He said he thought the car had passed over the puppy without crushing her, which was helpful in determining the extent of the puppy's injuries.

The puppy had a small bruise on her abdomen and no other visible injuries. Her breathing was very shallow, she was extremely lethargic, and her gums were almost white. Pale gums are a sign of shock and that blood is not properly pumping through her body, which can be fatal if not treated. According to the caller, the puppy had been walking around, and then stopped and hadn't moved since.

I placed a catheter in her leg and administered IV fluids as directed by our hospital staff. We are in constant contact with our hospital via our Field Operations radio system. She began to perk up a little. I closed the kennel door on the truck and got her back to the hospital. When I opened the kennel door she was standing up barking at me. Further examination by our vet showed no injuries other than the bruise. She was spayed three days later and adopted two days after that. Had I not been able to respond, the puppy would have probably died. Instead, a family was able to adopt a new pet.

How have the TV cameras affected what you do?

The cameras and crew didn't change what we do as much as the manner in which we do it. When I am being filmed, I have to remember to narrate what I am doing while I am doing it. For example, when I am examining a dog who I suspect was hit by a car, I need to say what I am doing, why I am doing it, what I am looking or feeling for, and the result of that examination. When you are used to being by yourself rescuing animals, all that talking takes a little getting used to. Other than that, all of the crews we worked with were very good at capturing the footage they needed without getting in our way.



Have you noticed any change in the community's response to animal shelters as a result of the show's popularity?
I think the show has prompted some people, who may not have considered adopting a shelter pet in the past, to consider it for their next pet. They see that there are a lot of wonderful animals that need homes, such as the ones we rescue from a traumatic or abusive situation, and want to help.

Has there been a change in the community's knowledge of or response to animal welfare in general?
People see our show and other related TV shows and realize that by making one phone call they can have a positive impact on an animal or animals in their area. A lot of people have a very soft spot in their hearts for animals, especially those in distress, and our show has given those people the nudge they needed to get involved.