



The Pet Rescue Foundation

Man in Motion:

Merrill S. Chernov, M.D., Phoenix, Arizona

Dr. Merrill Chernov is a cross between Ron Popiel and the energizer bunny. He has a dogged determination to "sell" his ideas to save homeless pets, and he keeps on going and going and going.

Dr. Chernov is relatively new to his calling. Until three years ago, he was a Board Certified General Surgeon practicing medicine in Phoenix. Then in 1998, he took a leave of absence from his practice and went to the local shelter to adopt a pet. The visit changed his life. "I was horrified by what I saw. Dogs and cats in dark and dreary cement cages facing death in a noisy, dirty environment. It broke my heart. As my wife and I left, I decided there and then to devote all of my time and energy to saving these little creatures who bring so much joy to people's lives."

His first thought was to take animals out of the shelter and put them in a more optimal setting to speed their adoption into a new home. "I was trying to figure out how to do this when I passed a church and the answer came to me. I thought, 'what about making them available for adoption in church and synagogue parking lots after services?' I contacted our Animal Control Agency to see if they would transport the animals and do the adoptions and then I contacted local religious leaders. The response was overwhelmingly positive." Adoptions skyrocketed at these events, often resulting in 30-35 placements in just a few hours.

Dr. Chernov's next idea to boost adoptions was to create more permanent offsite adoption locations. "I wanted to establish upscale, mini adoption centers and put them all over town in areas that were easy for people to access and close to growing neighborhoods. The plan was to purchase double-wide prefabricated mobile homes (at \$75,000 each) and deck them out first class, creating a showcase the public would want to visit." Hard as he tried, funding for this idea was not forthcoming.

But new ideas for boosting shelter adoptions were not in short supply. He pitched the idea of setting up adoption sites at truck stops for long-haul truckers looking for companionship. He promoted cab drivers adopting homeless pets to ride along for protection. He came up with the idea of 911 operators fostering underage kittens and puppies. "Operators on duty 24 hours could easily bottle feed newborn litters on their breaks instead of seeing these babies destroyed at our shelters."

Then Chernov discovered that 90% of all pets picked up by county animal control did not come in wearing identification. While 99% of pets wearing I.D. were reunited with their owners, most pets without it were killed at the shelter. The doctor's next project came into focus. "If I can get every pet to wear a phone number around his or her neck, I think I can drop shelter deaths in Phoenix by 90%." Dr. Chernov plans to do this by providing free temporary I.D. bands at commercial outlets all over town. "I've got 20,000 bands ready to go. Staples has already agreed to distribute the bands and I've contacted Blockbuster and Wells Fargo. I've also asked Governor Jane Dee Hull to proclaim February Pet Identification Month to kick off the effort. This campaign is a great opportunity to save lives and educate the public about the importance of pet identification. This band idea is what I've been waiting for. There's no question it will be the biggest success to date."