



Noah's Animal House, where domestic violence survivors can bring their pets. Above: Founder Staci Columbo Alonso.

Staying together

A shelter in Las Vegas offers a safe space for women escaping domestic abuse—and the pets they can't bear to leave behind. *by* LESLIE GOLDMAN

When Dana* showed up at The Shade Tree domestic violence and homeless shelter in Las Vegas late one July evening in 2009, she had a fractured nose and stitches zigzagging across her face. The 33-year-old carried nothing except Gumball, her 14-lb Pomeranian. Just hours before, the duo had been savagely attacked with a golf club by Dana's boyfriend, and Dana had thrown herself on top of Gumball to protect him. "All I want to do is make sure my dog is safe," Dana told the staff.

Today, thanks to Staci Columbo Alonso and her efforts to build a pet sanctuary called Noah's Animal House on the grounds of The Shade Tree, both Dana and Gumball are not only safe but living new lives.

Staci, a casino executive who has been on the board of The Shade

Tree shelter for abused women and children since 2001, came up with the concept of Noah's Animal House in 2005 after spending time volunteering in Hurricane Katrina-ravaged Louisiana. "I saw firsthand that people will remain in deadly situations, like flooding,

Women staying at The Shade Tree keep up daily care of their pets—the routine can speed healing.

rather than leave their pets," Staci says. "I started wondering about the residents at our shelter: Were there women who felt unable to leave their abusers because they feared for their

animals?" When Staci returned to Las Vegas, she asked Shade Tree's executive director what happened when women arrived with pets. Her reply: "We have to turn them away."

That answer was difficult for Staci to accept. "I've experienced devastating events in my life where I relied on my pets for comfort," she says. "I realized that in order to help more women find relief, we needed to create a safe space where their animals would be welcome, too."

Armed with heartbreaking statistics—up to 40% of women affected by domestic violence remain with their abusers due to concern over what will happen to their pets if they leave, and up to 85% report that their abuser has threatened, injured or killed a family pet—Staci asked The Shade Tree board for permission to build an on-site pet facility. Once approved, she set about raising \$550,000, mostly from private donors and area businesses. "I couldn't stand the thought of one more woman being turned away," she explains. "By giving these pets a bed, we're removing a final barrier for women to be able to leave abusers and rebuild their lives."

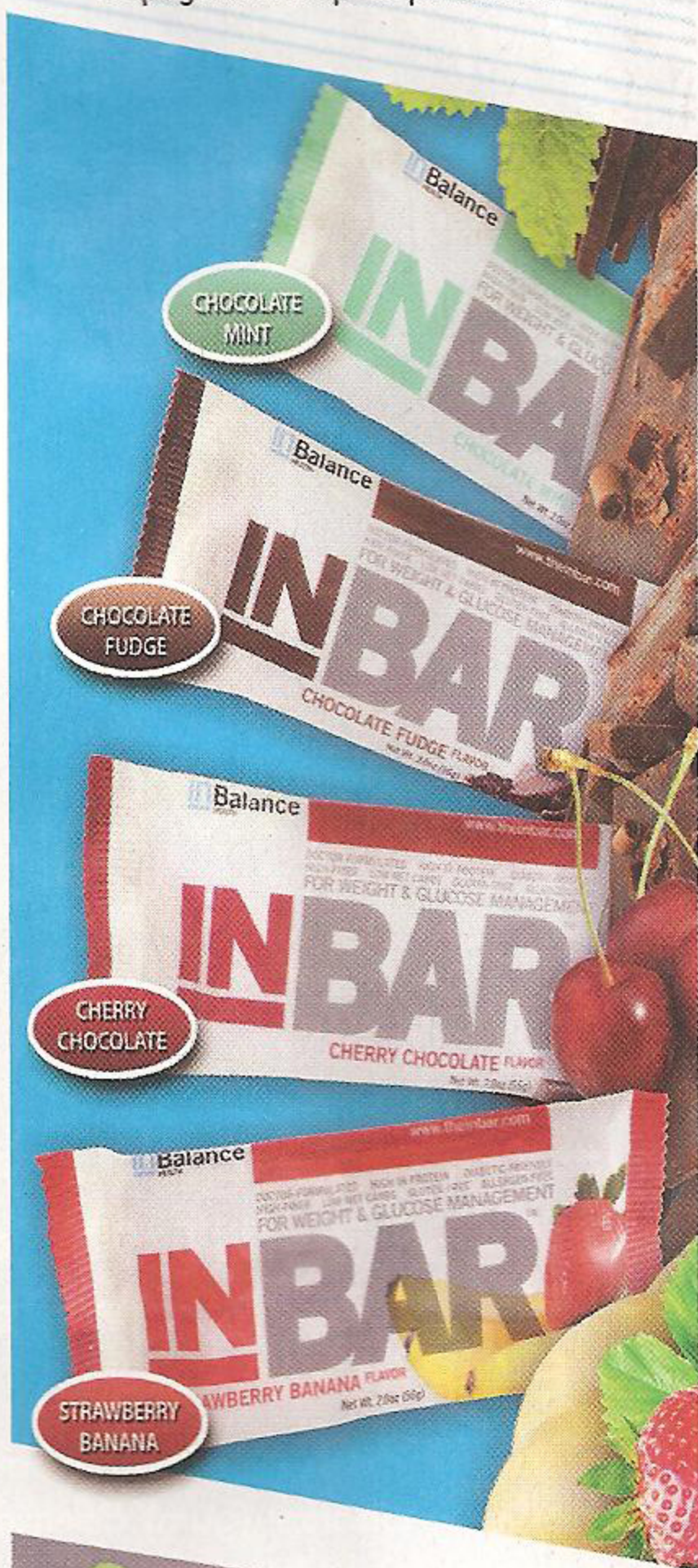
Noah's Animal House opened in 2007, and the 1,500-square-foot, 32-space bungalow (designed to resemble a giant doghouse) has since been filled with dogs, cats, even the occasional hamster or turtle. While the women at Shade Tree, who usually stay between 30 and 90 days, heal through self-empowerment classes and therapy, the animals are also given a fresh start. A local veterinarian, Tiffany Paul, donates her time to treat or

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PET Tales



Top: Staci (middle) with two former residents. Left: Staci, her son and their dog, Tahoe.

operate on injured animals, and grants from organizations like Build-A-Bear and NASCAR driver Ryan Newman pay for dental care, vaccinations, spaying and neutering. Women staying at The Shade Tree sign an agreement to keep up the daily care of their pet, including feeding, walking and changing litter boxes, in part because the routine can speed

“I couldn't stand the thought of one more woman with a pet being turned away.”

emotional healing. “Maintaining responsibility for their pets helps these women move forward and becomes part of their recovery process,” says Staci. There are also two “cuddle rooms” at Noah’s, where women can hug their pets.

Noah’s has provided shelter and medical care to more than 800 animals who may otherwise have been subject to violence or abandonment, including Arlo, a German wirehaired pointer. His

owner, Trish Steffen (above, left), arrived in 2009 after she endured job loss, an abusive boyfriend, alcoholism and subsequent homelessness. “Other shelters said I could stay, but I couldn’t bring my pets,” Trish, 51, recalls. (Shade Tree also took in Trish’s other dog and cat.) “I was not prepared to leave my animals—they were my lifeline.” At Noah’s, “all four of us would snuggle in the cuddle room and it was my daily moment of peace.”

Staci says that the difference in the women from when they knock on Noah’s door to when they walk out is immeasurable: They are uplifted and ready to start over, with their companions by their sides. After leaving Shade Tree, Trish landed a full-time job as a professional fundraiser and shares her story at events for Noah’s. “Women like Trish not only break free from abuse, but they come back wanting to volunteer,” says Staci. “They tell me that without a pet-friendly place like Noah’s they would never have left their abusers—that it’s what saved their lives.” ♦