



# Suites FOR THE Sweet

A Texas humane society offers innovative care and training for shelter dogs.

**By Meredith Wargo**



COURTESY OF KATRINA AND JEREMY STEELE

**The Steeles had to consider the needs of their five young children before they adopted Rebel.**

Grand Companions Humane Society in Fort Davis, Texas, Rebel landed in an innovative shelter that offers a paradigm shift in housing homeless animals.

“My passion lies with changing the traditional shelter image,” says Laura Langham, executive director of Grand Companions, a nonprofit organization in West Texas that has been offering sheltering and adoption services since 1989. “A socialized, well-adjusted animal is an adoptable animal. Our concept houses shelter pets with our workers throughout the day, which prepares the dogs for successful home living. We serve as a finishing school.”

Langham came up with the Grand Companions Sweet Suite Shelter concept in 2006 based on nearly 25 years of working in traditional shelter environments. “I’ve always believed that animal shelters could be structured so differently,” she says. “It was the biggest relief of my life when I realized that the Sweet Suite Shelter model would eliminate the need to ever use dog runs again.”

**Laura Langham high-fives one of the shelter dogs.**

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**F**or Rebel, an Anatolian Shepherd mix, it was the fourth adoption that turned out to be the charm. During the first 15 months of his life, Rebel bounced around to multiple homes. All his owners claimed he exhibited anxiety and behavioral problems that were too much for them to handle. When the third owner surrendered him to the Miriam McCoy Pet Adoption Center at

**Simulating the home environment**

The premise behind the Sweet Suite Shelter is to create an environment that more closely simulates a home environment rather than warehousing animals in an isolated area.

“A traditional shelter usually has administrative offices on one side of the facility and the animals on the other side,” Langham says. “Potential adopters often have

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difficulty making a choice when there are too many dogs to look at and too many distractions in the area. To me, that poses a real problem. We simply decided to shift the floor plan as well as the way we present our animals.”

Each administrative staff member at Grand Companions manages a suite, which consists of an office, meeting room, crate room, shaded outdoor patio, and a small yard. There are currently three dog suites in operation, and each suite can accommodate nine to 12 dogs. When funds become available, Langham says they plan to build a fourth dog suite plus a surgery area.

Grand Companions also has a cat suite, which is set up differently from the dog suites. There are two separate areas within the suite, one that houses kittens and the other adult cats. The cat suite can accommodate about 20 felines.

There are no dog runs, kennels, or cages anywhere in the facility. The dogs rotate their entire day within the suite, either spending time in the office with a staff member, in a crate, on the patio, or out walking with a volunteer. If the shelter receives a particularly timid dog, the

Laura Langham greets dogs in a play area.



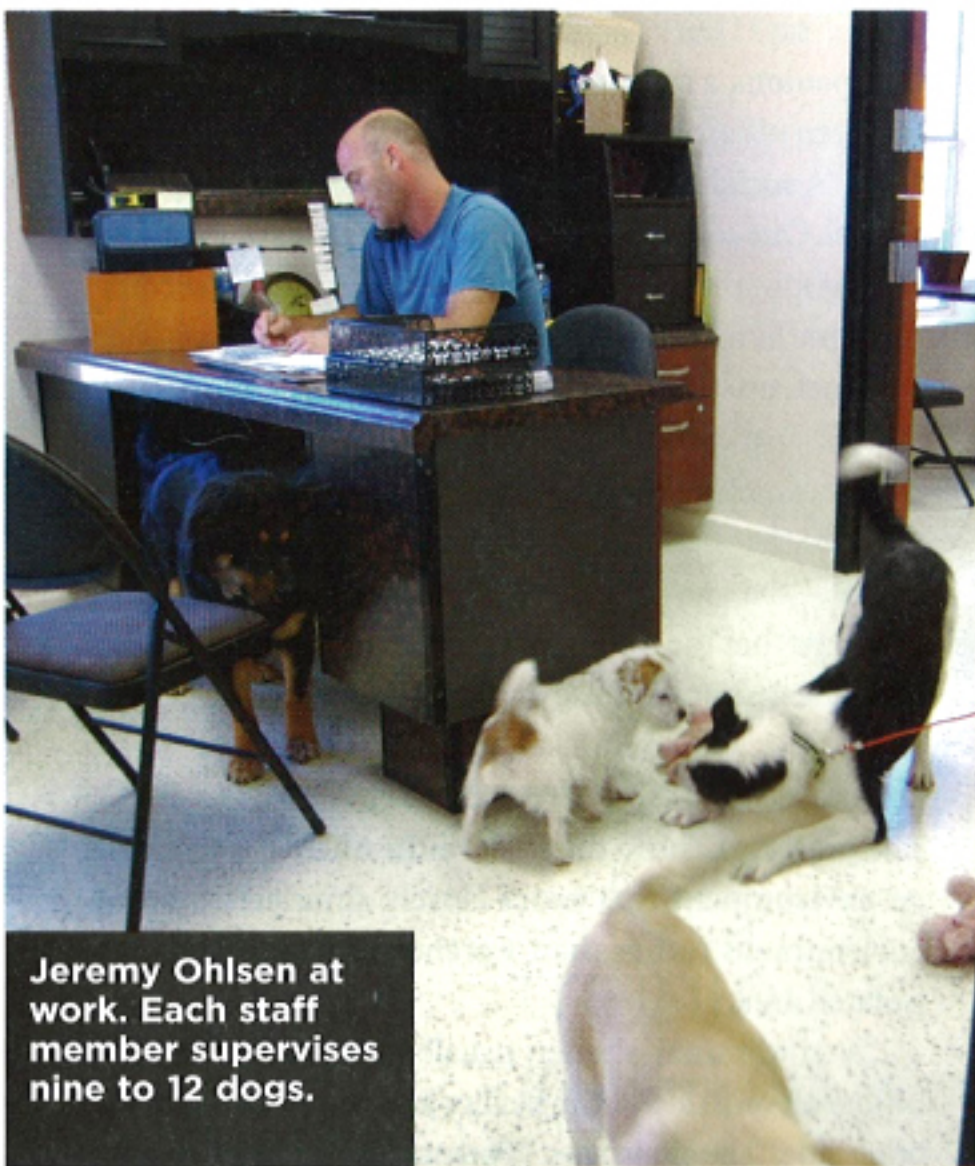
COURTESY OF GRAND COMPANIONS

animal is often tethered to a staff member during the day to get him acclimated to life with humans. Wherever the staff member goes, so does the dog.

The concept is similar to day care; the dogs have free time to roam and play, but there is also a daily structure. The shelter maintains strict protocols for walking and feeding the dogs, depending on their personalities. Throughout the day, the dogs are monitored for good behavior and are taught acceptable manners for living in a home. The staff also helps get them acclimated to daily household activities like sweeping, mopping, trash bags popping, and people walking in and out.

For dogs who experience separation anxiety, the Sweet Suite Shelter helps alleviate some of their fears. “As we constantly go in and out of the suite conducting our business, the dogs see that we keep coming back in,” Langham says. “This helps them get used to the idea that people can leave and it’s really no big deal.”

The private patio and outdoor yard also serve an important role in helping a dog adjust to a home life.



Jeremy Ohlsen at work. Each staff member supervises nine to 12 dogs.

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**The Sweet Suites system helps dogs become accustomed to the rhythms of living in a home.**

“Most American dogs are going to spend some time alone outside in their future home,” Langham says. “We provide group play as well as alone time on our patios every day.”

At night, all the dogs sleep in their designated crates in the crate room. Because there isn’t a complete turnover of dogs at once, the senior dogs teach newcomers how to acclimate to their crates.

In the Sweet Suite Shelter model, the staff members spend a significant amount of time with the animals, which provides them with valuable information that is

useful when matching pets and potential adopters. “We excel in interviewing candidates to find out what they really want in a dog,” Langham says. “And because we know our dogs so well, we are able to work with a client in finding the right match. It’s not a guess — we know.”

Such was the case with Rebel. After arriving at Grand Companions, Rebel spent several months learning how to live in a home environment. “Rebel is a smart dog and learned proper manners very quickly,” Langham says. “It was easy to see what a good dog he would be with the right owners.”

## FUTURE PLANS

Grand Companions Humane Society ([www.grandcompanions.org](http://www.grandcompanions.org)) is situated on a 6-acre site in the heart of the Davis Mountains near Big Bend National Park in Texas. There is currently a 1.3-mile-long walking path around the perimeter of the property. Future plans call for a low-cost spay and neuter clinic, a small community amphitheater, an off-leash dog park, memorial gardens, various fenced-in training yards, and a canine agility park.

“Although we’re in a rural



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**Grand Companions Humane Society is situated in rural West Texas, but hopes to expand into a destination for travelers.**

community, we want our facility to be a destination choice for folks who travel through this part of the country” says Laura Langham, executive director.

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Staff member Carol Darby brings a resident into the crate room.

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Very few dogs who come to Sweet Suite fail to adjust, according to Langham. If a dog isn't successful in the Sweet Suite concept, he would be hard to place in a home. Grand Companions is a no-kill shelter, and last year they put down only two animals. One was a very senior dog; the other had bitten two people and was aggressive.

## Seeking a special dog

In December 2010, Jeremy and Katrina Steele heard about the opening of the new pet adoption center at Grand Companions. They had lost their beloved Doberman Pincher during the summer and although they weren't in a rush to adopt another dog, they decided to visit the facility.

"When the time was right, we knew we wanted to get another large dog, but because we have five small children, we also knew it would have to be an exceptionally special dog," Katrina Steele says. "Laura knew the personality of all their dogs so well and immediately knew which ones to recommend to us based on our needs and the ages

of our kids. Rebel didn't seem the least bit bothered or stressed by the number of our children or their temperaments, even when one of my kids had a major meltdown. We ended up adopting Rebel that day and he's been a great fit for our family. It's really been good to have a dog around again."

Another benefit of the Sweet Suite Shelter concept is that it provides a positive experience for the staff. "We've taken every problem in any shelter and broken it down into pods that are completely manageable so everybody shares a bit of the work," Langham says. "There are no overwhelmed kennel staff that have to care for hundreds of dogs. In our facility, each staff member is responsible for a small portion of the chores. Our staff is not only trained and qualified as administrators, but they are also trained in animal care and behavior, working one on one with our pets every day."

Since implementation of the Sweet Suite Shelter program five years ago, adoptions at Grand Companions have increased by 200 percent. The shelter also boasts an

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The dogs experience people coming and going, which helps ease separation anxiety.

adoption rate of 90 percent to 95 percent for every animal that comes in. The other 5 percent to 10 percent die or are euthanized.

“Some pets come in with such serious medical problems that despite extensive treatment, we still, very sadly, lose them,” Langham says. “No-kill shelters are defined as those with limited admissions that do not euthanize for space. But no-kill organizations do euthanize for medical or behavior problems.”

Because of the success of the Sweet Suite Shelter, Langham aspires to open satellite facilities throughout the area, in rural locations as well as in small cities. “Our shelter, which is state approved and adheres to the recommended square footage for housing animals, serves as the prototype,” she says. “The satellite centers will be exact duplicates of our facility in terms of protocol, training methods,

and building design, which emphasizes attention to detail, from installing electrical outlets higher off the floor to specifying pet-resilient floor finishes and moldings to how supplies are stacked in the storage rooms. Keeping everything simple and consistent will allow the concept to be successful in so many communities.

“We’re simply trying to create a different option for adoption,” Langham says. “The synergy created from this innovative housing concept affords a positive environment for the pets, staff and clients. We recognize that humans are the ultimate interactive toy for our animals. And at the end of the day, if a dog can lie at the feet of a human, that’s all he really wants.” 🐾

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