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## Too cute, doggone it!

By **David Pevear, dpevear@lowellsun.com**  
Posted: 02/17/2009 10:30:01 AM EST

DRACUT -- Once an animal-control officer drops off a stray dog at Wignall Animal Hospital in Dracut, a grim clock starts ticking.

Hospital staff has 10 days to find the dog's owner, find the dog a new home or make that decision every dog-lover dreads.

"This is a healing facility," said Patricia Mancini, the hospital's manager. "To be put in the position of having to end an animal's life is traumatic. We try to take solace in that at least here the animal is loved and not killed by somebody out of cruelty, or not dying on the street. But it's very difficult on our staff. It takes a toll."

Nearly 400 dogs picked up each year by animal-control officers in Lowell and Dracut wind up at Wignall. Nearly half are happily claimed by their owners. If a dog is not claimed within five days, though, the staff knows the dreaded decision of the 10th day is certainly coming.

Some animals are unadoptable because of behavioral or medical issues and must be put down. Others are in need of only love. But this 10,000-square foot animal hospital, which also includes a boarding facility and dog day care, has not the space and resources to house them all.

Staff members, their soft hearts further softened by each case, often break down and bring home a sad-case animal. "In fact, it's become a joke that it's an initiation for new staff members," says Mancini.

Being unable to take them all home can be unbearable. As day 10 approaches, Jolene Landry, the hospital's



Spot is one of the stray dogs who currently calls Dracut's Wignall Animal Hospital home. If Spot isn't adopted after 10 days, the hospital may look to place him at Northeast Animal Shelter, a no-kill shelter in Salem. (Sun/Bill Bridgeford)

kennel manager, sends out e-mails searching for shelters with space. One of those e-mails last year resulted in Wignall Animal Hospital forging a relationship with the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, which Mancini says so far has saved almost 100 dogs from the Lowell area that probably otherwise would have been euthanized.

Laurie McCannon, the development director at Northeast, drives to Wignall in a van each week. On one trip, she returned to Salem with eight dogs after driving to Dracut to rescue four. The Wignall staff kept pleading, "Take this one, too!"

"They all have a personal thing with each dog," says McCannon. "They're kissing them goodbye and putting them in the van."

Northeast is a no-kill shelter.

McCannon laughs, recalling the first dog she came to rescue at Wignall.

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"Strangest-looking dog I ever saw," she says. "Short-legged. Basset-hound body. Big head. Scruffy and tan. Big underbite. I said, 'Oh my God, what is this thing?'"

Strange as the dog named Stohli looked, it was cute enough to be adopted from Northeast within three days.

Last August, the staff at Wignall convinced McCannon to take a big old black lab with a graying muzzle that had been abandoned in Lowell and faced being put down. The dog named "Riley" would lie quietly under McCannon's desk but bark in his cage when potential adopters arrived. He was adopted last September by a Somerville woman who saw his picture on the Northeast Animal Shelter Web site.

Wignall Hospital owner Dr. David McGrath and Mancini recently presented Northeast Animal Shelter with a check for \$3,009, raised during Wignall's annual Santa Sunday photo event in December.

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"Northeast Animal Shelter has been a fantastic partner," says Mancini. "They have made a huge impact on the outcome of the animal kingdom in Lowell. Animal-lovers in our community are fortunate."

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