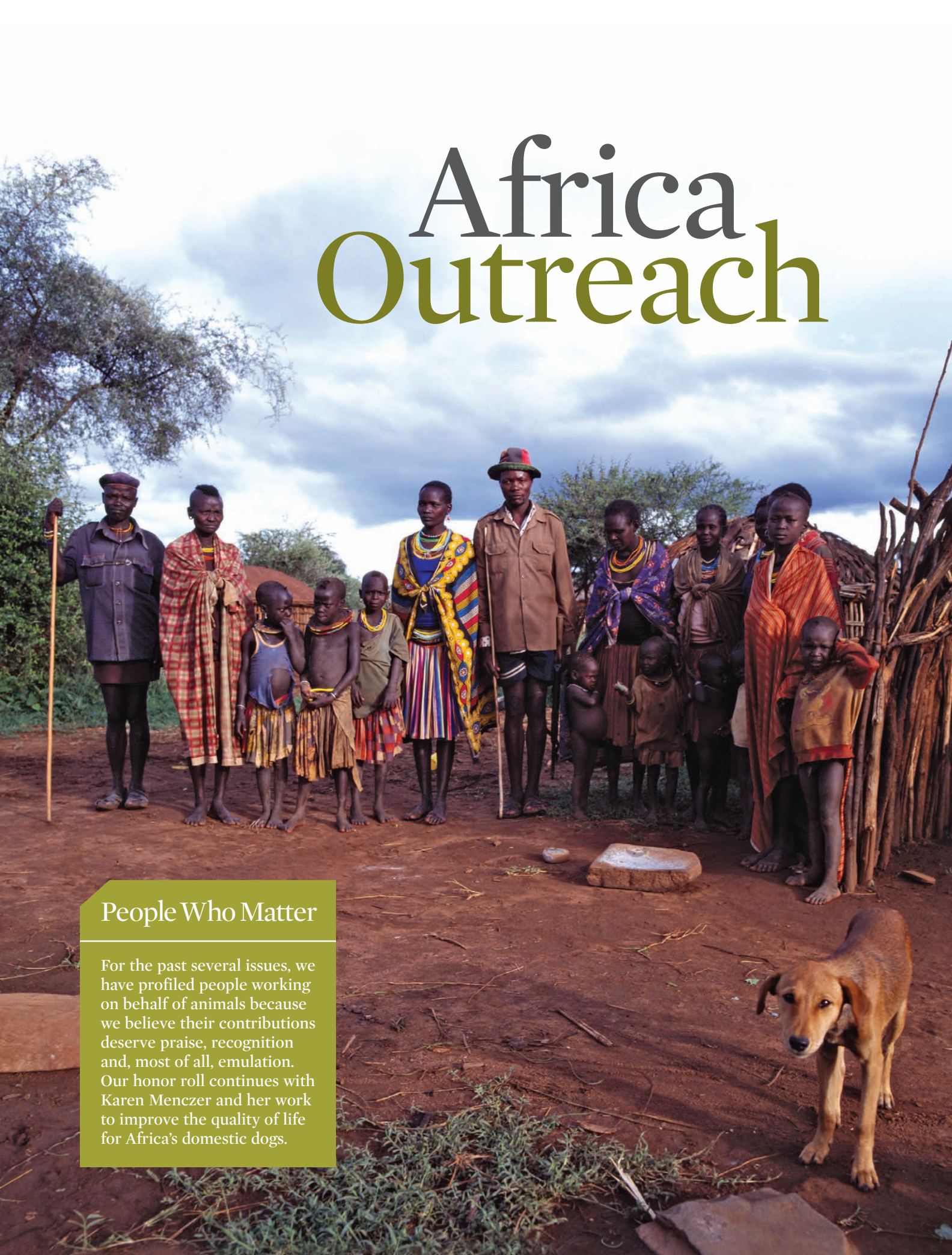
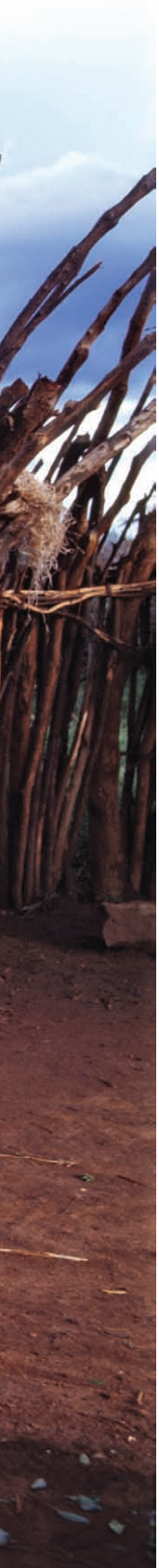
Africa Outreach



People Who Matter

For the past several issues, we have profiled people working on behalf of animals because we believe their contributions deserve praise, recognition and, most of all, emulation. Our honor roll continues with Karen Menczer and her work to improve the quality of life for Africa's domestic dogs.



Humane educator Karen Menczer works at the grass roots to help Africa's dogs

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID PLUTH

Karen Menczer at the Accra, Ghana, puppy market; she and members of the local humane group worked with vendors to improve the puppies' care.

SKIMMING UGANDA'S MORNING newspaper in April 2001 over my almost burnt toast and black coffee, I was struck by a story—or maybe by the picture. An American woman living in Kampala, working on conservation projects, was inspiring big changes at the Uganda Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (USPCA), setting up spay days and community education programs and helping to build a new animal care center in an impoverished neighborhood. *She has serious challenges ahead*, I thought to myself. *Most likely just another do-gooder whose idealistic dreams soon will be shattered against the rocky shores of reality.*

Later that night, in the quiet of my room, I was reminded again of the story. My window was open, and through it came a sound common to many East African cities: the barking of dogs. Their vocalizations pierced the night, moving in waves, getting closer, moving away, sometimes wailing or high-pitched, sometimes yippy, sometimes singsong, like the cries of wild animals. I never thought much about these urban dogs and their lives, even though I had spent many nights lying awake listening to their howls.

In much of rural Africa, dogs are highly regarded—I have often come across a herder or a hunter cradling his dog's head in his lap, gently petting her or scratching her ears, and I know a man in rural Tanzania, a market trader, who carries his crippled dog around with him everywhere he goes. But life in the cities is different for dogs. That closeness, that warmth of relationship, often is lost in the urban hustle.

Face to Face

Some weeks later, in Kampala, I was meeting with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, the agency responsible for the country's national parks. Sitting across from me was Karen Menczer, the woman from the newspaper, the do-gooder, the person

Opposite, clockwise: In war-ravaged northern Uganda, a man carries a puppy he described as his friend; washing dogs at the Accra, Ghana, puppy market; and Ugandan scenes—Labwor Hills, near the border with Sudan and Kenya; milking time; Crater Lakes, surrounded by forest; warming up around a campfire; and a traditional hut, with sleeping dog.

I'd thought of as an overly idealistic "junkyard warrior": She was short, with muscular arms, a shock of dark hair, and water bottle at hand (an obvious fitness fanatic). After the meeting she approached. "Hi, I have a big favor to ask you." *Here it comes, she wants a copy of one of my books*, I thought. But that wasn't it. Instead, Karen asked me to look over her "Simba collection," about 500 pictures of Ugandans with a dog named Simba.

Daily, with the permission of his owners, Karen took Simba for a walk so he could get out of the small wooden box to which he was confined when he was not guarding his owner's shop from midnight to 6 AM. Walking a dog is an unusual sight in most African cities, and Kampala is no exception. The pair first elicited stares, then curiosity overcame shyness. Before long, Karen and Simba had plenty of company on their walks. Karen used Simba as a humane-education dog, showing people how to approach him and pet him. Then she began taking pictures of Simba with his new friends and giving out the pictures as souvenirs. Children were especially curious about Simba, and Karen requested and received permission to bring the dog to schools to help educate children about animals.

The Simba pictures really grabbed me. There was Simba with friendly Ugandans in Kampala's rough suburbs—muddy roads, piles of garbage, places with mostly no electricity and no indoor plumbing. Karen had captured the children and their parents in their homes and yards, goofing off for the camera and having a ball with Simba.

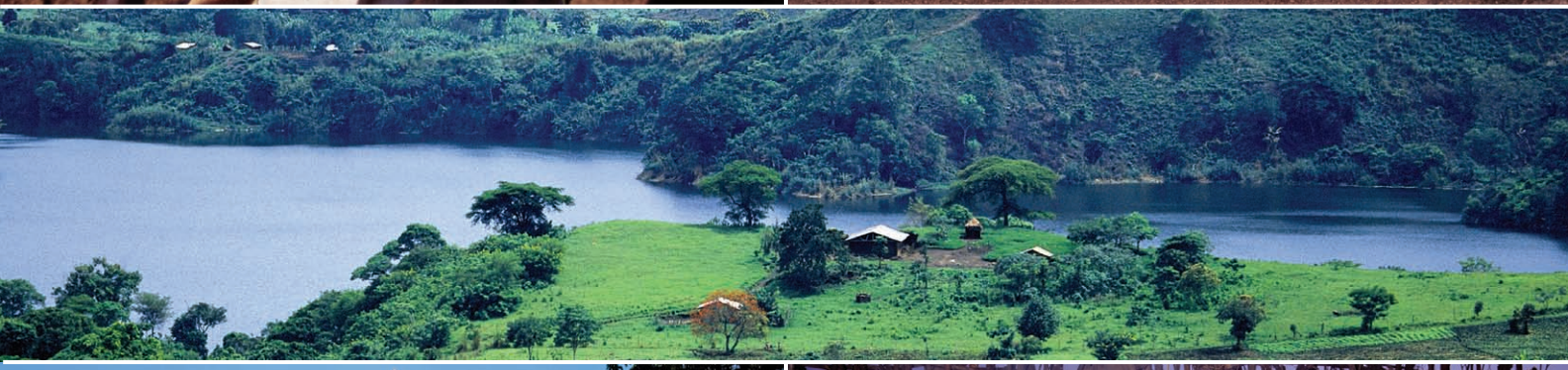
But it was not all rosy success stories.

Key to Change

In her wallet Karen carries a key, a reminder of the cruelty that befalls animals, the sad reality for many dogs and cats in the world. Karen had given a USPCA doghouse (one of the organization's projects, intended to encourage humane treatment) to a young boy she befriended. The boy, Joshua, had a small puppy he'd named Sammy. Karen liked both the boy and the puppy, and visited them often. Sammy loved the new, airy doghouse, so different from the dark, cramped crate he had lived in. Joshua explained that the doghouse needed to be locked because someone might try to steal Sammy; he kept one key and gave Karen the other as a sign of trust. One day, she went to visit, but Sammy was not there. Karen asked where he was. "Oh, we killed it," one of the local boys said. He and his friends, including Joshua, had stoned Sammy to death. Karen was stunned.

Rather than give in to anger, Karen's response was to use Sammy's murder as a community education opportunity. With the help of a friend—a large, powerful, eloquent Ugandan man who commanded respect through dignity—she rounded up the children and their parents, and he spoke to them in Luganda, their own language, to affirm the ideals of sanctity of life and talk against cruelty to animals. He cajoled, he shamed, he encouraged and he enlightened. Karen is certain that this community meeting changed the attitudes of the children present, and that they will carry the lessons learned that day into adulthood. Single actions can make a difference.

As we sifted through the Simba pictures, Karen told me more stories about how most dogs in East African cities live. Unlike in the villages—where dogs are kept for hunting, for herding and as companions, and where crime is rare—life in the city has changed the relationship between humans and their dogs. People in the cities have dogs for guarding. Dogs are "trained" to guard by being confined to a small wooden box, which is rarely big enough for them to stand up or turn around in, for about 18 hours a day. Sometimes, multiple dogs will share one box. The dogs can see nothing outside the box; their world is the lifeless space of those few square feet. Only one person is allowed to feed the dog; every-



one else is the enemy. Tough behavior is encouraged by feeding the dog hot chilies, beating on his box, prodding him with sticks to make him angry, perhaps even starving him to make him alert and always on the prowl for food—a sure recipe for a mean and mistrustful canine.

The Uganda SPCA is trying to educate people about more humane methods of keeping and training dogs, while providing free spay/neuter and other veterinary care for animals in need. In Kampala, Karen discovered that many people thought vets treated only livestock, not cats and dogs. Moreover, most were not aware of the use of anesthesia for animal surgery, or even that surgery could be done on animals. As a USPCA field supervisor, Karen helped develop many of these USPCA services. Her management style also encouraged a sense of collegiality as she worked with local professional staff and training volunteers, some of whom have gone on to spread the word and work for change in Ugandans' perceptions of animals. For example, Katia Ruiz Allard, one of the founders of USPCA, continues the work, ably aided by Berna Nakanwagi, the USPCA vet, and Ibra Nakasero, the volunteer humane officer; Nakanwagi and Nakasero are both Ugandans who care about dogs and are trying to improve the lot of Uganda's animals.

In a developing country rife with pressing social issues, Karen also encountered some of the other challenges of being a grassroots animal welfare activist: negotiating with Muslim leaders in a village before setting up a spay day; learning that when you instruct someone to put their dog "inside" for a day or two after she has been spayed, "inside" might mean inside the chicken coop; and dealing with a shelter manager who is selling dogs and pocketing the proceeds. One of the pleasures: discovering that it is often the poorest people who treat their dogs with the greatest respect and care.

Leaving Uganda in 2002, Karen moved on to other aid projects—first to Gaborone, Botswana, and later, in 2004, to Accra, Ghana, where she served on the boards of the national SPCAs. There was no shortage of enthusiastic local volunteers in either country, but each had a different perception of dogs. In Botswana, a prosperous diamond-exporting nation, dogs are kept in open yards primarily as guards, and pedigreed animals are increasingly common as local attitudes toward improved care and feeding have shifted. In Ghana, dogs simply are not very popular. While it is uncommon in both countries to see dogs running around on the streets, when Karen walked dogs in Gaborone people would sometimes approach her with curiosity, even pet the dog, but in Accra, people showed no interest, or sometimes even shooed her away. They explained that since dogs are unable to speak, they cannot have feelings; and besides, they are dirty. And there were rumors about some tribes even eating dogs.

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Yet, in this environment, the Ghana Society for the Protection and Care of Animals (GSPCA) sprang up as a result of the efforts of two Ghanaians, David Nyoagbe and Roland Azantilow. They had been WSPA Kindness Club leaders in school, and decided that they wanted to improve the lot of dogs throughout Ghana. After consultation with WSPA, they registered as a nongovernmental charity. Karen arrived within their first year of operation and before long became a board member and treasurer. She immediately started helping to raise the visibility of the organization by working with the vendors in the market where puppies were sold.

Puppy market vendors sell dogs like they sell shoes and bananas. A car drives up, the passengers stay in the car, the vendors run up with a puppy in each hand (and sometimes one under the arm) and push the puppies through the open window into the client's face. The

Karen Menczer

Simba at a school in Kampala, Uganda.

haggling starts, and when it's done, for about $3, the car's occupants drive off with a malnourished puppy. GSPCA worked with the vendors to improve their care of the dogs as well as moderate their rather aggressive marketing methods. They held a course on dog care, and all graduates received a certificate. (The vendors' marketing skills still need a little work, however.)

Lessons Learned

After more than 10 years living abroad, working as an international natural resources consultant in Uganda, Botswana, Ghana and Jamaica, Karen, her husband, and her three African dogs and two cats (one African, one Jamaican), moved back to Jemez Springs, New Mexico, in 2006. She still finds time to work with African SPCAs between her extensive business trips to Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. Of course, as she has been for the last 30 years, she is deeply involved with local animal welfare issues in her new home; she is now president of the Jemez Valley Animal Amigos, working in the local community to improve conditions for dogs and cats, promote spay/neuter, and help find homes for stray and unwanted dogs and cats. So, what lessons did Karen bring back with her to the U.S.? Her own words say it best.

"It's easy to misinterpret. You learn to ask questions, listen, ask more questions, listen a lot more, and ask any possible question you can come up with so you can get the whole picture.

"It's all about the pet owners trying to figure you out, and you trying to figure them out, and along the way, you make little improvements for the animal, slowly, slowly (as we say in Uganda). After a year or two, you realize you've made an impact.

"Working with animals in Africa is all about working with people. It's that way in the U.S. also, but in Africa it is even more: You become an auntie to all the families you are working with. There are expectations of you as an auntie, you get invited to weddings and funerals, you have to make a contribution to all the big family events. If a member of the family is sick, you will be asked to assist; the families expect you to come into the house, be a guest, join them for tea. When you start working with African families to help them improve the lives of their pets, you take on all the responsibilities of being one of the family."

And what about Simba, the dog Karen took out of his crate and walked each day—the dog she used for animal education? Karen had always been bothered that Simba's only moments of freedom and happiness were on their walks together. So, one day, very early in the morning, she lured him into her truck and drove him straight to the home of a loving family who would care for him, feed him and take him for the daily walks he loved. A couple of days later, she was on the plane leaving Uganda, moving on to the next adventure and the next country that needed an energetic "junkyard warrior."

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