

Rescuing animals

■ T-shirt maker uses profits from business to care for creatures abandoned on his East Village doorstep

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG
STAFF WRITER

Several weeks ago, 75 exotic reptiles weighing a combined ton — boas, pythons and alligator snapping turtles — boarded a bus on East Fourth Street in Greenwich Village for a trip down to new homes in sunny Pensacola, Fla.

The shipment of rehabilitated animals was one of dozens to depart from Social Tees, a T-shirt shop in Manhattan's East Village where abandoned cats lounge on top of caged reptiles and

snakes doze off in drawers near the front door. Each year, more than 3,000 unwanted animals — bearded dragon lizards, rare turtles and, once, a lion — crawl, hobble and slither through the store, which doubles as an animal rescue service. At Social Tees, printing custom made T-shirts, bags and caps, most for school fund-raising projects, comes second to rescuing animals in the New York area.

For the past 10 years, first from a store on Bleecker Street and now at 124 E. Fourth St., owner Robert Shapiro has found homes for abandoned reptiles with collectors and zoos worldwide, many in warm, sun-drenched Florida, the perfect climate for the creatures. His is one of few animal rescue services in Manhattan to specialize in reptiles. The store also finds homes for cats and dogs.

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— Frank Indiviglio,
a herpetologist
at the Bronx Zoo

"I've picked up everything other than a giraffe and an elephant," said Shapiro, from behind the counter at Social Tees, where T-shirts scrawled with messages like "Break the

Trend. Smile Back," and "Life is More Than Looking Like a 'Gap' Ad" dot the walls.

Schools, churches and other organizations sell the shirts nationwide to raise money, and Shapiro puts profits toward animal rescue.

In New York City, animals like boa constrictors and monitor lizards (frequent guests at Social Tees) are illegal to own, according to the city's Department of Health. But that doesn't stop some New Yorkers from buying them outside the city or online.

The only lion taken in by the store was bought on the Internet, said Shapiro, who sent the cub to a Pennsylvania wildlife rehabilitation center. In the United States, 9 million reptiles and 20,000 large cats are kept as pets, according to Captive Wild Animal Coalition, a group of 20 animal protection organizations.

Cool but tough to care for

"People think exotic animals are cool, but they don't know how to take care of them," Shapiro said, adding that owner misconceptions about exotics, garnered largely from pet stores, lead to most of the animals he sees being sick.

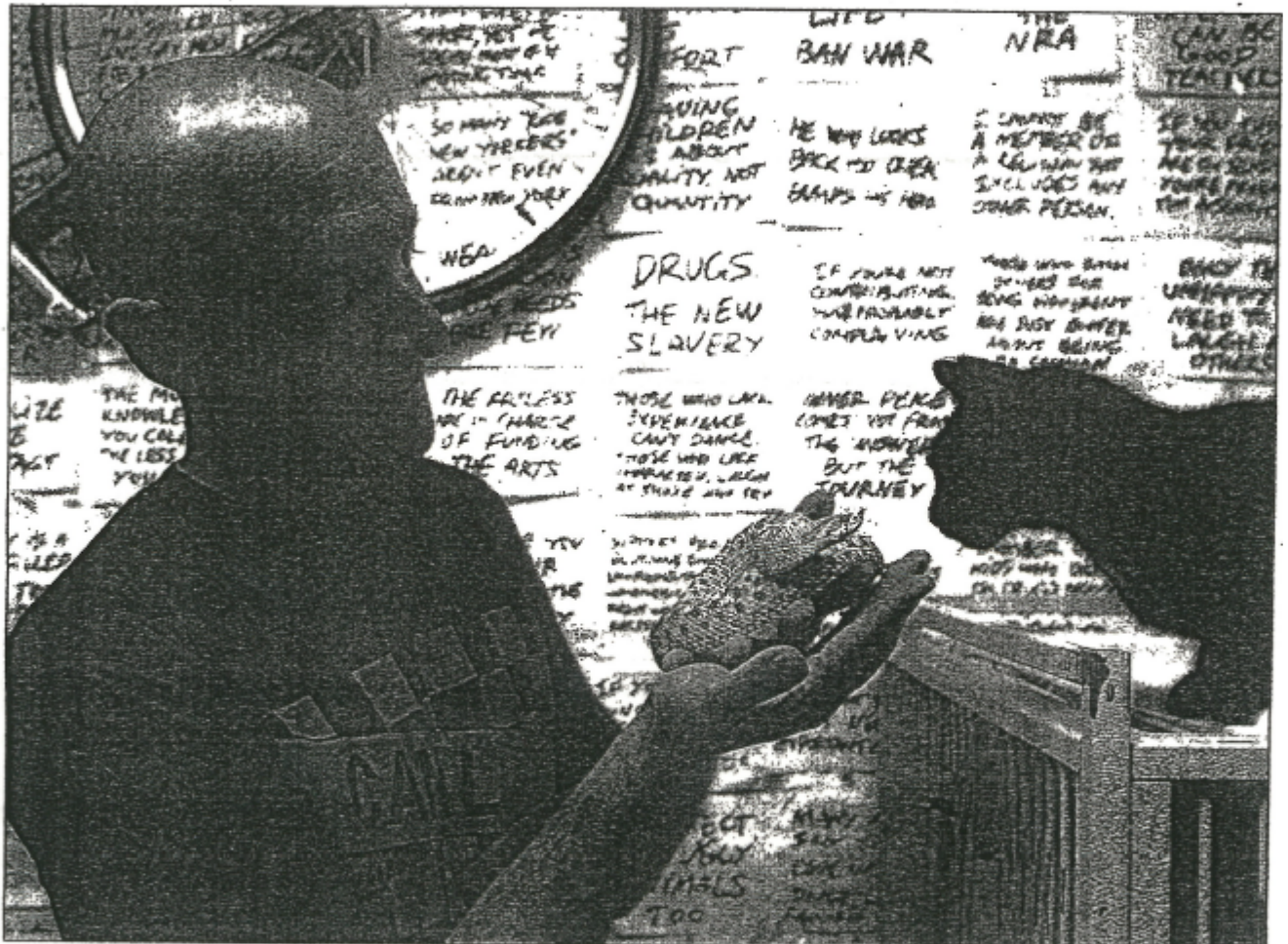
A tiny, dark drawer is a happier home for a snake than the fish tank most pet shops recommend, he said, peering at a bald python snake in the plastic set of drawers near the store's entrance, a "snake condo."

At Social Tees, 99 percent of the animals are "owner surrendered" — cats dropped off on the store's doorstep in the middle of the night or reptiles carried in by overwhelmed owners. Others arrive via police escort, after officers discover the creatures roaming the streets. And yet others are routed there by organizations such as the ASPCA.

"Robert is somebody who we rely on heavily because our facility is only so big," said ASPCA spokeswoman Louisa Grooterbaum. "He's among a select few who always say yes to orphaned animals."

Frank Indiviglio, a herpetologist at the Bronx Zoo, also re-

suits him to a T



NEWSDAY PHOTO / VIOREL FLORESCU

Robert Shapiro holds a hognose snake as cat Oskar looks on. Shapiro has 38 cats at the store, and once found a place for a lion.

fers animals to Shapiro after receiving calls from New Yorkers who bought exotics but can no longer care for them.

"Zoos can't handle them because we don't have space," he said. "Rob has the knowledge and the compassion. He's a star in the neighborhood."

Every year, Shapiro spends thousands of dollars shipping reptiles to experts who "defi-

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nately know what they're doing." Once, he sold a rare two-headed boa constrictor to a private collector in Asia for more than \$1 million. (The snake was born to a pregnant boa brought into the store.) Shapiro put all of the proceeds into his rescue efforts; he places all other animals for free.

"All reptiles get places, but I can't put a dent in the number

of dogs and cats destroyed," Shapiro said. "The most important thing to rescue in New York is cats, by far. A lot of people just can't afford the vet bills when their animal gets sick."

Some sad statistics

In New York City, out of 44,553 cats and dogs picked up from September 2003 through August 2004 by Animal Care

and Control, the organization responsible for the city's municipal shelter system, 9,508 were adopted or returned to their owners, 5,731 taken in by organizations such as Shapiro's and 28,979 euthanized.

Thirty-eight cats currently make their home in Social Tees — including the "king of the shop," Oskar, a black and white stray cat — as do a dozen dogs in need of adoption live with volunteer caretakers. "Oskar also has his own pet hamster, 'Lucky,'" Shapiro said. "Get it? He sleeps with a freakin' cat, he's lucky not to be lunch."

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