

GPA going strong

*As printed in the Greyhound Review October 2001, Reprinted with permission
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Back in the mid-1980s, when about the only public pet adoption effort around was Ron Walsek's Retired Greyhounds as Pets (ReGAP) in Florida, all heck was about to break loose. The industry was on the verge of opening a handful of new tracks, mostly in the Midwest. Sharp spikes were beginning to show up on the breeding and whelping charts, and the number of retired Greyhounds eligible for adoption was about to escalate proportionately.

Unfortunately, Walsek's group wasn't equipped to handle the overload—a situation that perhaps contributed to the group's increasingly unfriendly approach to the industry.

Thankfully, what emerged from this seedbed was a more middle-of-the-road group of caring folks—some involved at the time with ReGAP, and even some of them in racing—whose sole aim was to place as many Greyhounds as possible in homes as pet. So it was that Greyhound Pets of America (GPA) was born. GPA felt, that in order to maximize its effectiveness, it needed to take a political position of neutrality with regard to racing—a position it maintains to this day.

GPA remains by far the country's largest adoption program, with more than 35 chapters stretching from coast to coast. It goes without saying that there are other, non-GPA groups that do just as creditable a job in the placement of Greyhounds as pets (an the intent here is certainly not to ignore the good works of those organizations). Clearly, though, GPA has been the standard-bearer for nearly two decades now.

The fact was abundantly evident last month at GPA's annual conference in Atlanta. The three-day affair was an incredible exercise in the exchange of wisdom and experience by people within the adoption movement, as well as those not directly in the loop (such as Dr. Rob Gillette and first-aid expert Jean Bourassa, who made worthwhile presentations at the conference).

Also crystal-clear is the fact that GPA, with its many years of experience, has made an art form of preparing Greyhounds for adoption (even tough cases), fund-raising, and finding just the right home for a particular retired Greyhound.

For those who think a position of neutrality is a wishy-washy approach or the coward's way out, thing again. GPA's taken more than its share of flak from the anti-racing folk (who sometimes accuse GPA of selling out to racing—even some who falsely claim neutral groups have made matters worse by prolonging the status quo). Unfortunately, GPA has even taken a few hits from racing's side as well—by those who'd prefer GPA take a more pro-industry posture.

Despite the criticisms, GPA quietly moves forward, not prone to waste any time on the political issues, in its relentless pursuit to place as many Greyhounds as possible. It's really hard not to admire such resolved and consistency. Not to mention principle.

Yes, there are GPA chapters that take a more arms-length approach to racing than others. And, not every news article featuring a GPA group will cast the industry in the exact light we'd like (with the negative spin more often than not reflecting the prejudice of the reporter, armed with Internet misinformation, than the views of the GPA chapter). The beauty of GPA's charter is that it allows such diversity, while still working within the framework of its neutrality.

One thing we know: Whenever faced with a humane issue where Greyhounds have been or are at risk and a pet adoption groups is involved, it's always more reassuring when the groups is from GPA. In nearly all cases, the industry will at least get fair treatment. And so will the Greyhounds.

Our message to the folks at GPA at their Atlanta conference was simple and threefold. First: Thank you for all you do in finding good homes for such a large percentage of our retired Greyhounds (more than one in every six Greyhounds placed is by a GPA chapter). Second: Thank you for giving Greyhound owners a viable outlet for their retired Greyhounds, especially those who insist or prefer on working with friendly or neutral groups. (Can you imagine how many fewer Greyhounds would have been placed in the last 18 years without GPA?) And finally, a suggestion: Let's expand our channels of communication—we folks in Greyhound racing (NGA, AGC, AGTOA, etc.) and you in pet adoption (GPA, etc). And let's begin with more frequent more open discussion at our respective meetings, starting with out foremost agencies involved with animal welfare (AGC and GPA)

Although a veteran group with many years of experience, GPA remains strong and vibrant. Many of the faces have changed over the years, but their cause and message continue to be extremely appealing to American public. The industry must work more closely with them—and help however it can...