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LAST year, the RSPCA received 13,000 complaints of cruelty to animals in Victoria. As well as animal rescues and routine property and animal business inspections, RSPCA inspectors spend hours preparing animal cruelty prosecution cases and attending court.

"The sheer volume of pain and suffering inspectors have to not only witness but be responsible for resolving is difficult to comprehend," says senior inspector Lisa Weston. "After finishing a typically long day . . . they still maintain the strength and composure to throw on a smile and present an entertaining lesson to a group of schoolchildren, all the while absorbing the extra pressure of working for an organisation that relies on donations from the public for funding."

Ms Weston oversees the RSPCA's 20 Victorian inspectors and assists them with the big caseload. An animal lover for as long as she can remember, she says it is rewarding to work for an organisation that reflects her values and objectives.

"The RSPCA is the only animal welfare organisation in Victoria authorised to enforce legislation (the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act)," she says. "We use this privilege every day in order to help animals and manage situations where animals' owners are reluctant

to cooperate. This authorisation also enables us to help bring to justice those who have caused the suffering," she says.

When starting out, Ms Weston — who did a bachelor of biological science, focusing on wildlife management — volunteered with animals as often as possible. As a child, she rode her bicycle to the local wildlife park on weekends to help the keepers open at 7am and spent holidays doing work experience at vets and animal organisations.

"There are a lot of people who would ideally like to work with animals but they have to be willing to do the hard yards as well. There are people I speak to who say it's very hard to get into — it is and you have to be a cut above, I suppose. It has to be your passion. If we are hiring, we want to see evidence of that dedication. So if somebody has got to the end of their degree and still doesn't have any experience working with animals, we start questioning what they are doing with their school holidays, weekends and across their summer."

Ms Weston recalls attending an RSPCA volunteer session as a teenager where the senior inspector said it was hard to say exactly what experience was needed to be an inspector, telling the group that

people usually get to a point in their career where they find they are suitably qualified. Ms Weston found herself in that position after working for many years without a day off. She sometimes juggled three or four part-time jobs, determined to do the hard yards because she wanted more experience working with animals.

"If you take a look at the position description it will say you need things like investigation skills, knowledge of the animal industry.

"But I think inspectors require expert communication skills; extraordinary time management; never-tiring problem-solving abilities; a thick skin; and most importantly, respect for all living things — including people."

Ms Weston, who has also worked with the penguins and koalas at Phillip Island Nature Park, says her staff have diverse skills and experience and come from backgrounds including wildlife management, domestic animal behaviour, agricultural farm management and law.

"At the end of the day, I can go home and know we have done everything we possibly could, using all of our skills and expertise, to make the life of an animal a little bit more tolerable."

DEBI TAYLOR



Animal protection officer Lisa Weston put in the "hard yards". PICTURE: GARY MEDLICOTT