



*"The Observer
has come to stay,
and it won't
take water from
anything that
wiggles."*
— George Hbbet
Observer Founding Editor
Dec. 28, 1900



CHINOOK OBSERVER

The News Source for Washington's
Long Beach Peninsula
since 1900

Tuesday, March 02, 2010

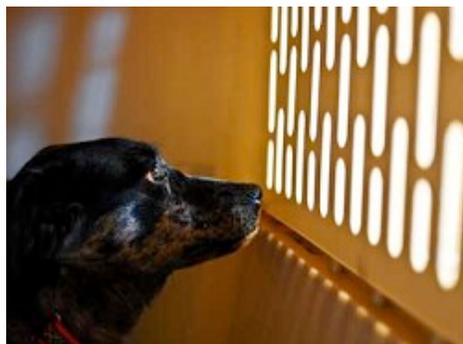
Saving one dog at a time

Local family helps spearhead an effort to rescue stray dogs in Eastern Oregon

By Cate Gable

Observer columnist

Tuesday, March 02, 2010



Photos by DAMIAN

MULINIX/Chinook Observer

Since coming to live with the Eppings after being rescued from a dog hoarder in Burns, Ore., Cody, an Australian Sheppard puppy, is still getting used to domestic life. Cody spends a lot of his time lying in his pet carrier, where he seems to feel most at ease.

There is a lot of good in the world, perpetuated by people quietly doing what their hearts tell them is right.

Two of these passionate and committed individuals are Melanie Epping. She and her husband of 20-years, Curtis, co-owners with Don and Carol Epping of Funland in Long Beach who have been rescuing dogs, one at a time, for years.

Then, in September 2008, Melanie with sister Angie Tiller and friend Michele Hamilton created Save a Stray, soon to get its non-profit papers from the IRS, and the pace of their efforts accelerated.

Harney County Rescue

The Save a Stray team has been involved in three large dog rescues in Harney County in the last two years.

This most recent rescue effort involved a call from the Burns, Ore., police just before Christmas and also got the Eppings in the Oregonian.

"The police got a tip and arrived on the property when the



weather was 6 below zero," Melanie continues. "There were 200 dogs - mamas with puppies, some dogs chained to farm equipment - and scattered all around were rotting pieces of cow carcasses that smelled, even in December."

"Just imagine what that would have been like on a hot desert day in June," she adds.

For years Melanie Epping and her husband have opened their house to numerous dogs they have helped rescue.

"When you see a situation like that, you have to focus on what you can do instead of just sobbing," says Melanie about the 30-acre site 20 miles outside of her hometown.

"I was born and raised in Burns," she says. "It's a very remote high desert area southeast of Bend, Ore. There is no animal shelter there and these dogs would have been shot if we hadn't started finding homes for them."

Most of the dogs had no shelter. Some were in wooden crates scattered around the property; some were in wire pens or 55-gallon drums turned on their sides. Some were chained to abandoned trucks.

When police arrived, most of the healthier dogs scattered. They had had little human contact except for the people who had spread the leftover bones and carcasses from a local meat processor.

Good Will Gone Bad

There were two adult renters on the site, Anita Anderson, 55, and her husband, Ronald, 43, living in a single-wide trailer.

"Ron and Anita were the only human contact these dogs had," Melanie continues. "These two were arrested, but now they are working with us to trap the remaining dogs so that we can bring them in to spay and neuter and find them homes, if they're adoptable."

"It's part of their probation," she says. "Ron and Anita are required to help us instead of going to jail. It's not that they are bad people, they just got in over their heads."

With no local shelter in the area, the word got around that the acreage outside of town was a place you could dump a litter of puppies or a dog you didn't want. With no help and no financial means to spay or neuter these strays, the Andersons informal "refuge" spiraled into a living hell for the dogs.

Melanie shares a photo she took of the cage that housed the dog she and her family are fostering. Cody, a beautifully-colored one-year-old Australian Shepard mix, lays in his new kennel adjacent to Melanie's office.

The photo shows a wire-fenced cage with no roof. The dirt is piled thick with bones. There is no soft place to lie down or get out of the sun.

Most of the dogs, whose only food was the rotting meat, have been shown to be suffering from intestinal parasites, worms and giardia. Many needed extensive veterinary care before they could even be placed in foster homes for rehabilitation.

"Forever Homes"

Cody shared his wire cage with four or five other dogs. Two of his cage mates have found their "forever homes," as Melanie calls them.

Cody had been "banded," which is how steers are castrated - a common practice in the cattle country around Burns. A metal band is pulled tight around the testicles so blood is cut off. Eventually the testicles fall off.

"It must be extremely painful," says Melanie.

Cody, currently being fostered at the Epping home, bonded immediately with their three other dogs, Mojo, Gilligan and Mallory. But contact with humans is more problematic.

"You have to remember that these dogs have never been on a leash, never worn a collar, never had anyone pet them or call them by name," says Melanie.

"They need to be socialized before we can even think about finding them a permanent or forever home," she goes on.

Dogs Must Be Socialized

So the next stop for most of these strays - after a complete health check, shots and neutering - is a foster home with someone who understands canine behavior, someone with infinite patience who can bring a dog back to itself.

"Cody's personality is starting to come out," Melanie goes on. "He likes to collect things and stack them up in the front of his kennel: shoes, boots, the cats' toys."

"And the other day he dug up my flower pots on the porch," she shares with a smile. "He's starting to act like a dog."

To be deemed adoptable a dog must be healthy and have no attitude issues.

"Puppies are easy," says Melanie. "We just got a call from a Burns family that had three adult dogs and two litters of nine puppies each. They turned all 21 of their dogs over to us to place."

Adult dogs are more difficult to find homes for, especially if they have behavioral issues like most of the dogs on the Harney County acreage. But, one dog at a time, Melanie is finding either foster

families or forever homes for the animals.

"We have placed probably 400 animals in the course of our Save a Stray work," she says. "It could be more but I don't want to sound like I'm bragging."

Quiet Perseverance

"Bragging" could not be further from the truth, according to Laurie Campbell, a Tacoma resident with a second home in Ocean Park.

"Melanie is so amazing," Campbell says. "When I read what she was doing I said, 'we need to support her, she can't do this all by herself. We've got to help.'"

"But look what she has done," Laurie says in awe. "She has made endless phone calls and answered hundreds of e-mails. She and Curtis are driving all over the place picking up dogs and taking them to foster homes or other stray organizations."

"She has a quiet perseverance," Campbell continues, "Bless them both."

Laurie and her husband Brad Campbell have adopted two animals from the South Pacific County Humane Society in Long Beach and now they have one of the Harney pups too.

"We are always bringing the shelter stuff - blankets and food, whatever they need - and then I saw what Melanie was doing in Burns on the Web site so I called her and said, 'how can we help?'"

Keebler Lands a Home

The result was Keebler, an Aussie Shepherd mix puppy found at the Harney County property.

"I guess he was pretty good at hiding," says Laurie, "Byron Wilkes, one of the fellows who's been working with Melanie, saw him under a trailer, abandoned, no mom, no buddies. All by himself. And they managed to catch him."

Keebler was very sick. "It took three visits to the vet before they thought he was strong enough to even get a vaccine. He was full of round worm. Then there was the treatment for giardia."

"It was three weeks before his stools were normal," she continues. "He looked like a big fluff ball but when you picked him up you realized he was just a bag of bones. It was uncomfortable to hold him, he was so boney."

In three weeks with the Campbells, Keebler has gone from three and 3/4 pounds to almost nine - his growth will be probably stunted from early malnutrition. But he has found his forever home.

It Takes a Community

Melanie and Curtis are citizens who stepped up to a problem that needed attention. They jumped in without asking questions or whining about what could not be done.

"Curtis has made three of four trips down to Burns - it's a nine-hour drive, one way - to pick up dogs," says Melanie. "He just came back with 19 more dogs last Friday."

"But the other day he said, 'I'd like to go to Utah for an ATV [All Terrain Vehicle] event - no dogs,'" she laughs.

"I said OK, but on the way back we'll pick up some dogs in Burns to bring back north."

Melanie has contacts all over the Western States for humane shelters and private rescue organizations. This recent Harney County episode has been both a crisis and a blessing.

"I've gained so many more contacts in these last weeks," she says. "I couldn't have done it without help."

Melanie cited Keleigh Schwartz, co-owner of Beach Dog.com, for assisting with their Web site; Diana Galbreath, humane shelter director; and Ed and Catherine Linblad of Oceanside Animal Clinic as people without whom she could not do what she does.

Randy Dennis of Dennis Company has donated Science Diet dog food to any Pacific County resident who will permanently adopt one of the dogs.

"We are so blessed to have a no-kill shelter in Long Beach run by caring volunteers," Melanie admits.

Schwartz concurs, "People are so dog-friendly here. People know my dog's names who don't know me. And you find dog water bowls everywhere."

"Plus, you can't go through a drive-through -whether it's for an espresso or to deposit a check -without getting a dog bone," she adds.

Melanie agrees and is a regular volunteer and supporter of the local shelter. She is also mission advocate for the dogs. "That means I speak for the dogs, I'm their advocate to the shelter board," she says.

"And you absolutely cannot have a successful shelter in an area without a local vet. They tried to start one in Burns, but the local vet wouldn't support them, so it fell apart," she adds. "Ed and Catherine are fabulous."

"Our whole community is so supportive," she adds. "We raised \$10,000 last year on a raffle - can you imagine how many tickets that is?"

You Can Help

Melanie wants to acknowledge all the help she has gotten to-date from Greenhill Humane Society in Eugene; Heartland Humane Society in Corvallis; and Pet Adoption Network in Philomath, all in Oregon state. In addition Coopers' Boarding Kennel in Amity; Meridian Valley Humane Society from Meridian, Idaho; and Byron Wilkes of Washington Animal Response Team have all helped.

But the suffering is not yet over for the Harney County dogs. As Schwartz shares, "There is still a lot of work to do. The dogs are having more puppies faster than we can get them out."

There are still 30-plus dogs to be caught, transported, neutered, cared for, fostered and adopted. For more information about the Harney County crisis see (www.harneycountysaveastray.com).

To donate or for more information about our local shelter, call the South Pacific County Humane Society, 324 2nd Street NE in Long Beach, at 642-1180.

To support Melanie Epping's work, please send a check to Save a Stray, P.O. Box 402, Burns, OR 97720 or give her a call at 541-589-1104.

Related Links

Content © 2010 Chinook Observer
Software © 1998-2010 **1up! Software**, All Rights Reserved