


OC resident helps dog-fighting victims

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Oregon City resident Jo Becker recently returned from a weeklong journey to help care for the dogs at a Humane Society of the United States emergency animal shelter.



by: PHOTO COURTESY: JO BECKER - Saved from a suspected dog-fighting group, a pit bull receives attention from staffers at the emergency shelter.

Becker, 39, says she was fairly successful at compartmentalizing her “grunt-work for a week” from the full reality of the cruelty behind the situation.

“The dogs were so incredibly sweet and such innocent victims in this story,” she said. “They’ve never known life as good as this.”

Becker recalls reading to a handful of the most frightened and withdrawn of the dogs in the shelter.

“For them, very quiet, minimal interaction was important to help them relax and get comfortable with people,” she said. “I spent 20 or 30 minutes reading to each one individually. One or two were so nervous I turned around on my stool and read with my back to them, turning occasionally to roll a treat into the pen for them. They never got up to get those treats. I only hope they retrieved them after I left, taking to heart all the “good boys” I offered while I was there.”

Becker spent her last couple of days working with a section of bouncing, bubbly adolescents whose energy and enthusiasm was “simply precious.” After months of individual care and proper food and water, Becker says most of the dogs seemed to be doing well.

“I really can’t bring myself to imagine what their lives had been like before being rescued,” she said.

Criminal trials have not yet begun in what is thought to be the second-largest dog-fighting raid in U.S. history. It took place Aug. 23.

The national organization assisted in the seizure of 367 dogs suspected to be bred for fighting in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas and Georgia.

With help from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the groups transported hundreds of pit bulls to temporary shelters, and then turned their attention to providing ongoing care of the dogs, which were estimated to range in age from several days to 10 to 12 years at the time of seizure.

Both national groups also assisted authorities in collecting forensic evidence, including the remains of dead animals discovered on some of the properties where dogs were housed and allegedly fought.



by: PHOTO COURTESY: JO BECKER - Jo Becker plays with some of her kittens back at home in Oregon City.

Humane Society of the U.S. officials declined to identify the location of the emergency shelter.

–These dogs have been in secret shelter locations for six months, and there’s no telling how much longer before the legal cases are resolved,” Becker said. –Secrecy was important and, of course, legally the animals are ‘evidence.’ Heaven forbid, justice doesn’t prevail, the ‘property’ must be returned to the defendants in as good or better condition than when seized. Of course, for all of us who volunteer, it’s about the animals, but this harsh reality was real and palpable.”

Dog fighting is a felony in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, and the multi-state investigation has involved numerous local agencies, led by U.S. prosecuting attorneys and the FBI.

–These defendants were betting between \$5,000 and \$200,000 on one dogfight,” said U.S. Attorney George L. Beck, Jr. –The number of dogs seized and the amount of money involved in this case shows how extensive this underworld of dogfighting is. These dogfighters abuse, starve and kill their dogs for the supposed ‘fun’ of watching and gambling on a dogfight. Their behavior is deplorable, will not be tolerated, and will be punished to the full extent of the law.”



by: PHOTO COURTESY: JO BECKER - One of the rescue dogs plays outside at the Humane Society of the U.S. emergency shelter.

Local volunteers needed

In going to the emergency animal shelter, Becker responded for the second time to a national call for volunteer experts, the other in response to Hurricane Sandy in December 2012 (–Volunteers help Sandy’s four-legged victims recover,” Jan. 2, 2013). The main difference between the storm-related animal shelter was its individually owned pets versus a shelter set up as part of a criminal case like this.

–In some ways, this was very similar,” she said. –The primary objective each day is to feed, clean and care for the animals.”

Typical shelters have a variety of breeds in various shapes and sizes, but it was –mind numbing“ for Becker to see so many pit bulls

in one place.

–There were so many brown pit bulls, and lovely tan pit bulls, and black pits with a touch of white here and there,” she said. –There were so many that after a while, especially moving between different areas in only a week’s time, it was hard to keep them straight.”

Becker spent her first three days in an area with approximately 40 dogs. Throughout the shelter, Becker saw signs of many stories that may never come to light –only the silent victims know the horrors they faced. She saw many female dogs with extended nipples –suspected evidence of frequent and repeated matting and nursing –even in dogs that weren’t very old. And, just like people, the individual animals responded to their situation differently.

–Some were damaged by their upbringing and despite intense care and studied behavior training, a few continue to sit in the corner of their pens,” Becker said. –Others proved unbelievably resilient, trusting and taking comfort from people as if they’d never known how cruel humans could be.”

Volunteers provide the dogs daily mental and physical stimulation aimed at aiding animals’ natural, healthy behavior. They gave treats to the dogs that sit on command or keep –four on the floor,” as opposed to jumping up on the cage for attention.

–My favorite reading partner was a light brown pit the volunteers called Ethel,” Becker said. –I read to Ethel twice, and each time she quietly sat close to the front of the cage and took treats from my hand as I read. She was nervous, but sweet. I only learned later that she typically spends her time fully hidden beneath her bed; it made

me appreciate the value of what I was doing there.“

Becker reported that there also was a small brood of chickens, also confiscated from one of the properties, at the shelter.

–I don't know a lot about chickens, but have had some experience and enjoyed working with these,“ Becker said.

They, too, Becker said, got behavioral enrichment treatment. –For them,“ she said, –it was sitting quietly talking to them or reading to them and hand feeding them treats. They loved tiny dried mealworms, which they'd pluck out from between two fingers. I particularly enjoyed holding them and feeling them relax in my arms.“

Throughout her stay, Becker and other volunteers cheered as a handful of released dogs were matched up with rescue groups and shelters across the country that have the capacity to work with them toward eventual home placement

–There were cheers and high-fives; some cried tears of joy that these dogs were moving on to better opportunities and a chance at a normal life,“ Becker recalled.

–This trip taught me a great deal about dogs in general and about these 'trauma victims' specifically,“ she said.

–I'll forever be grateful for the honor of helping to care for those animals. I met wonderful people and made great friends at the shelter, but the scope of this operation and the depravity that allows some people to do this to other living beings still dumbfounds me.“

You can help canine victims

Jo Becker encourages Clackamas County residents to visit the HSUS site to learn more about this and other national animal abuse issues (humanesociety.org/action).

Locally, the Oregon Humane Society has championed several advances in Oregon's animal protection legislation (oregonhumane.org/advocacy/overview.asp). Becker added, –Please take the time to reach out to elected officials to voice your support for animal protection legislation.“

Becker, who has lived in Oregon City since 2006, is a member of two technical rescue groups, Oregon Humane Society's Technical Rescue Team (oregonhumane.org/services/animal_rescue.asp#.UqeXFyfbcgw) and the Washington State Animal Response Team (washingtonsart.org). She offers free information and presentations on preparing animals for disaster at www.jobecker.weebly.com.