

Shelter volunteers deliver 10 dogs to North Dakota

By JEFFERSON WEAVER
Staff Writer

Candice Gary was half-joking when she suggested that she'd drive a van loaded with dogs to North Dakota if someone donated the van.

A volunteer at the Columbus County Animal Shelter, Gary and other volunteers had just said goodbye to several dogs being transported to new homes out west. Noting how well the local teams worked with their counterparts in North Dakota, Gary said she was up for a road trip, if someone could find the money.

"Next thing I know," Gary said Friday, "we were collecting donations."

"When I told my husband what we were doing, he just stared at me."

A total of 10 shelter dogs - Dallas, Hadley Ashton, Adrienne, Trinity, Carlisle, Tristan, Reaston, Natalia, and Dixon - left the Columbus shelter just before 11 a.m. Friday, riding in a full-size commercial van rented with donations.

The dogs are heading for a rescue group in Jamestown, N.D., where they will be picked up by their new owners.

Raffaela Breininger and Gary planned to drive the 1,600-mile journey in shifts, drop-off the well-traveled dogs Saturday and make their way back to Whiteville Sunday night or early Monday.

"My dad was a long-distance truck driver," Breininger said, "and I love a road trip. When we go home to Connecticut, I drive the whole time on the way up. I love driving."

Gary, a native of Pennsylvania, has a long commute every day as well, but nothing like this.

"It's going to be a challenge," she said. "We might try to do a little sightseeing on the way back, but we want to get those guys up there and settled."

Several other dogs went to the Rough Rider State in previous adoptions. Animal Control Supervisor Joey Prince said, but those animals traveled in relays, with volunteers handling over their charges to drivers along the route.

"Candice and Raffaela are going to handle the way alone," Prince said. "The two women are both Corrections Officers, and worked with Prince before he was hired by animal control."

"When I found out Joey was here," Gary said, "I thought about how I wanted to volunteer, but didn't know who to talk to. Here was somebody I knew, and he really makes us feel appreciated."

Gary has an advantage over some volunteers, in that she is a certified dog trainer. Her skills have come in handy more than once at the shelter, and might have saved a few furry lives, too.

"She has a way with them," Prince said. "They know who wants to help them, and who will hurt them, but a lot of times, they come in scared, hungry, mangled and hurt. It takes a calm person to make friends with some of the dogs who might otherwise have to be put down."

Gary gestured to one of the dogs making the trip to the Northwest. The black-and-tan mixed breed barked and growled when he first came in to the shelter, Gary said,



Several hunting hounds were among the passengers heading west Friday.

but has since become trusting enough to walk on a leash and go to a new home.

"He was kind of intimidating to some people," she said. "The people who turned him in had gotten scared of him. He's a big boy but he just wanted to be friends."

"Our problem is we try to talk to dogs," Gary said. "They don't speak human. We don't speak dog. We communicate with words, but they bark and use body language. They recognize smells long before a human ever could - that's why some dogs bark at their family members when they see them coming up the driveway. They can't yet smell them."

"Even before a dog can hear or see, he can smell," Gary said. "All I do is sit with them, and let them get used to my scent. After a while I'll give them a treat, but you don't always have to give a dog food to be friends. Eventually the dog will understand. You just have to let them come to you on their terms, especially if it's a scared dog in the shelter. The less you speak, the better."

"Candice has been great about helping walk and train dogs here at the shelter," Prince said. "She's made it easier for several of them to get new homes."

Gary said rescues across the country have been happy to help place local dogs, although moving the animals requires time, volunteers and donations.

So-called "power-breeds" have a special place in Gary's heart.

"You have folks who suffer from Pit Bull Syndrome," she said. "There are some dogs

whose bloodlines have been bred to be aggressive, but most dogs, even the 'dangerous' breeds, can be trained. The problem is the person, not the dog. People don't understand the dogs, and that frightens the dogs."

After a brief delay Friday (the van rental firm had supplied the wrong vehicle), Gary, Breininger, Prince and the shelter's inmate work crew assembled crates and kennels, locked them in place in the van, and slid panels between the cages to prevent disagreements between uneasy riders.

The former hunting dogs enthusiastically climbed into their crates, while the mixed-breed travelers, possibly with fewer pleasant memories of riding, were reluctant to board. Between Gary's coaxing and some urging from their inmate friends, the dogs were finally secured and bedded down for the journey around 11:30 a.m.

Gary said she hopes improving attitudes will reduce the need for cross-country networking of unwanted dogs and cats.

"Some of these places don't have stray dogs, because they have mandatory spay and neuter programs," Gary explained. "We have a lot of problems to deal with here - people don't have much money, and there's not a tradition of getting their dogs fixed."

"That results in more unwanted dogs all the time. If we can get people to get their dogs and cats spayed, it would make a big difference in the number of dogs that end up in the shelter."

Prince rubbed the head of one of the westbound hounds and told him goodbye.

"He was blowing fur at the vet's office the other day, shedding his winter coat," Prince said. "I told him he might want to hold on to all the fur he can get - it gets cold out there in North Dakota."

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