



7-year-old finds way to help West Deer dog shelter

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By Sandy Trozzo

Theo and Baker barked from behind the chain-link fence as the green minivan pulled up to the West Deer Dog Shelter. But when the back door opened and Chelsea McMillen got out, they stopped barking and started wagging.

Their No. 1 fan was here, and she had a bag of dog biscuits.

Chelsea, of West Deer, has been a mother hen to the dogs at the shelter for the past year -- even though, at age 7, she is too young to officially volunteer there. She visits the shelter several times a week, armed with treats for the dogs.

At Christmas, she collected nearly \$250 to help with the shelter's expenses.

"She's an amazing child," said Barb Pasquale, volunteer kennel manager. "I find it absolutely amazing that a child that young can figure out things adults can't -- that dogs need money for care, to pay vet bills."

The dog shelter behind the township building on East Union Road was started 17 years ago as a way for lost and stray dogs in the township to get a second chance. All dogs picked up by animal control and code enforcement Officer Gary Bogan are brought there to be either reunited with their owners or adopted by new families.

And Chelsea knows all the dogs by name, having researched them on the center's Web site, www.westdeertownship.com/dogs.

An admitted dog fancier, she is unable to own one because of her sister's allergies and the family's busy schedules. "Now I have five dogs -- these dogs," she said, pointing to the shelter's residents.

Beth McMillen said her daughter buys dog treats with her own money. She recently bought a large bag of biscuits with money left by the Tooth Fairy when she lost both front teeth.

"She'd spend all day up here if she could," her mother said.

Chelsea likes to visit after church on Sundays when the shelter is closed. The dogs can go from indoors to outdoor pens via pet doors. She feeds them biscuits through the fence and talks to them.

"They aren't fighting anymore," she said as Theo and Baker decided to cooperate and share the treats.

On a recent Sunday, Theo and Baker were on one side of the shelter. On the other, two dogs named Basmati and Chelsea were given their share of treats. Two other dogs, both older, stayed inside to be out of the cold.

"She's a normal 7-year-old. She's just very compassionate about dogs," Mrs. McMillen said. "I think it's fabulous."

Chelsea recently remade her bedroom into a shelter, lining up all her stuffed animals and putting up a sign proclaiming the room to be "Chelsea's Dog Shelter."

Why does Chelsea like dogs so much? "They're cute," she said. "They're nice."

She came up with the idea of "Canes for K-9s" after students at her school, Curtisville Primary Center, raised money for the shelter. "She wanted to do something on her own," Mrs. McMillen said.

Chelsea decorated a container with photos of the dogs at the center, then went door to door in her neighborhood and solicited parents at her sister's soccer games and at her gymnastics classes. Everyone who gave a donation to the shelter received a candy cane, Mrs. McMillen said.

Canes for K-9s collected \$246, which was more than the school's donation. She received a Volunteer Excellence Certificate from Principal Christopher Brough for her efforts, her mom said.

"She decided on her own to do all of this," Mrs. Pasquale said. "I just find that stunning; that a 7-year-old can think of all this."

Mrs. Pasquale said the shelter spent \$15,000 on veterinarian bills last year. Volunteers raised the money, which allows the shelter to remain a "no-kill" facility.

Volunteers at the shelter have to be at least 12 years old, so it will be a few years before Chelsea can join the ranks of about a dozen kids who volunteer Mondays and Wednesdays, walking the dogs and helping to clean the facility, Mrs. Pasquale said.

For the next five years or so, however, Chelsea said she will continue to visit with her parents, feeding the animals treats through the fence. And she plans to own dogs when she grows up.

"How many do you want?" asked her mom.

"Five," Chelsea replied.

"And what do you want to be when you grow up?" asked mom.

"A vet" was the not-surprising reply.

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