

Dogs seized in alleged dog fighting operation given new lease on life

By Mark Pavilons

Several abused dogs, used in alleged dog fighting activities, have been given a new lease on life, thanks to the efforts of King's Dog Tales and the Ontario SPCA.

Dog Tales and the SPCA worked together to create an option for the dogs seized in a criminal investigation of an alleged dog fighting operation in Chatham.

In January 2016, an application was placed before the provincial court seeking permission to euthanize 21 dogs who had been seized from an alleged dog fighting operation in Tilbury. Providing the specialized care required to help severely abused dogs overcome their past requires significant resources, resources that can be hard to come by when operating within a public shelter system.

Dog Tales Rescue and Sanctuary, a privately-owned animal rescue operating out of King, recognized this, and immediately took action, filing an intervenor application before the court in hopes of saving the dogs and transporting them to Florida to take part in an enrichment and socialization program lead by world-renowned canine behaviour modification specialist, Aimee Sadler, founder of Dogs Playing For Life.

"When we heard the story of these dogs and all that they had endured, it was important to us to ensure that they be given a chance to experience love, kindness, and life as it should be," said Robert Scheinberg, co-founder of Dog Tales.

When the intervenor application was denied by the court, Dog Tales then mounted a large-scale public awareness campaign.

"The #SaveThe21 campaign was born out of necessity. We were desperate to help the dogs, but were running out of options. The purpose of our campaign was to demonstrate just how many people around the world cared, in hopes that it would inspire a different outcome," said Danielle Eden, co-founder of Dog Tales. "We were completely overwhelmed by just how viral the campaign became."

Tens of thousands of animal lovers around the world joined in the effort by sharing photos of themselves and their dogs across social media with the campaign hashtag #SaveThe21. At the same time, more than 30,000 letters were written to the Ontario SPCA and to the Ontario Provincial Government, requesting that the euthanasia application be withdrawn. A number of animal-loving celebrities added their voices to the campaign, including Paris Hilton, Sir Richard Branson, Enrique Inglesias, Adrian Grenier, Natalie Imbruglia and Maggie Q.

Two weeks into the campaign, Dog Tales received the news that so many had been waiting for -- both sides had agreed to transfer the dogs to Florida pending third-party behavioural assessments.

Dog Tales then arranged for canine behaviour specialist Jim Crosby to travel to Canada in the month of May for the purpose of re-assessing the dogs. Of the 21 dogs subject to the original euthanasia application, two have tragically passed away. Of the remaining 19 dogs, 18 were recommended for transfer to Florida for enrichment. Sadly, for a dog named Tommy, a second euthanasia recommendation was made, citing serious human-focused reactivity. This comes as a direct result of the terrible abuse that Tommy suffered prior to his rescue, and it is devastating that he will lose his life as a result. The remaining 18 dogs will begin the next part of their journey in memory of the three who were lost.

On July 20, 21 months after the dogs were originally rescued -- the outcome was made official in the form of a court order from Justice of the Peace S. Hoffman. Dog Tales will cover all costs associated with the future care of the dogs, the enrichment program, and transport.

"The dogs are getting an extraordinary opportunity due to the resources that Dog Tales is providing. We have been pleased to work in partnership with them on this outcome and hope to work with them on other initiatives. Our role in this case has always been to provide the balance between the welfare of these dogs, the safety of other animals and public safety. We need to remember that dog fighting is a criminal act," said Deputy Chief Jennifer Bluhm, Ontario SPCA.

"The Ontario SPCA rescued the dogs from the nightmare that they had been living each day. Now, Dog Tales will provide the dogs with all that they need to move forward and start a new chapter of their lives," said Robert Scheinberg. "We are so grateful for each and every individual who never lost hope, and who gave these dogs a voice after they had been voiceless for so long. If only these dogs, once forced to fight, knew just how many people have been fighting for them. We are overjoyed."

Those wishing to follow the progress of the dogs can visit www.dogtales.ca/savethe21.

Those wishing to learn more about how they can join the Ontario SPCA in ending dog fighting can visit www.ontariospca.ca/what-we-do/investigations/dogfighting.html.

The Criminal Case is still proceeding. Additionally, the charges laid under the Dog Owners' Liability Act are still before the court with a pending court date of Aug. 24.

Robert Scheinberg and Danielle Eden have launched Dog Tales, following a gala, star-studded celebration Oct. 19 in 2014 at their beautiful property north of Snowball.

Dog Tales is home to Horse Haven, which offers horses a happy place to spend their final years, along with attention and medical care. For more, visit www.dogtales.ca.

Ontario SPCA and Humane Society has ben protecting animals since 1873, Ontario SPCA is Ontario's Animal Welfare organization. A registered charity comprised of close to 50 communities.

Since 1919, when Ontario's first Animal Welfare legislation was proclaimed, the Ontario SPCA, with the help of its communities, has been entrusted to maintain and enforce Animal Welfare legislation. The Act provides Ontario SPCA Agents and Inspectors with police powers to do so.