

Rescued puppies come to Venice

BROOKY BROWN PROJECTS EDITOR *VENICE GONDOLIER*

At least 221 Puerto Rican pound puppies were headed for a Yonkers, N.Y., animal adopt-a-thon over the Labor Day weekend. They arrived in Orlando via a cargo plane.

The puppies, ranging in age from 4 weeks to 1 year old, were to be picked up by a transporter and kept overnight in Bushnell before being loaded on a truck and taken to Yonkers.

“The animal transporter found some dead puppies at the airport when he went to pick them up,” said Dr. Lynn Duffy, a Venice veterinarian. “He took them to Bushnell to feed, water and provide them with shelter overnight before the trip to New York.”

The next morning there were more dead puppies. Concerned, the transporter called his local veterinarian and asked him what to do. That vet called the University of Florida Disaster Animal Rescue Team.

As a result, the University of Florida’s Maddie’s Shelter workers arrived in Bushnell and quarantined the place.

“Dr. Cynda Crawford from Maddie’s Shelter sent an e-mail blast to all veterinarians and vet technicians in Florida begging them to come help with the unfolding disaster,” Duffy said.

That was Friday night, Sept. 10. On Saturday and Sunday, Duffy went to Bushnell to help the ailing pups.

Duffy answered the call for help for two reasons: one, she couldn’t stand the thought of the suffering puppies, and two, from about age 12 through high school she lived in Puerto Rico while her father worked for General Electric. “It was because of the deplorable conditions of the animals in Puerto Rico that I decided to become a vet,” she said.

As for the situation in Bushnell, it wasn’t much better.

“It was a disaster,” Duffy said. “There were two and three puppies in the flight kennels and they all had diarrhea, gross contamination; they were stressed and sick and the situation was grossly understaffed.”

Duffy said all the vets wore two pairs of gloves to prevent cross contamination, as well as protective gear.

They separated the dogs into groups of sickest to least sick. Duffy said the puppies were supposed to be 8 weeks old for the youngest but they suspected some were only 5 or 6 weeks old. The age was only supposed to go up to 6 months, but a few adults were slipped into the mix as well. Those were mothers with puppies.

The dogs were infected with parvo virus and distemper. They were quarantined, meaning no dog could leave or enter the Bushnell housing site.

By Sept. 22, 53 healthy dogs that were determined to be free of disease were transported to the Central Florida SPCA in Orlando and by Sept. 24, 20 had been adopted.

Thirty-three of the youngest diseased puppies, who were doing well clinically, were only allowed to go home with veterinarians.

Six private vets agreed to care for them under isolation conditions until they were recovered or euthanized due to deteriorating conditions.

Duffy brought five of those puppies back to her practice, Island Animal Hospital of Venice. She kept two of them and the remaining three have been adopted by local families. All are healthy.

Another 29 distemper infected dogs were taken to a state-controlled site in Altamonte Springs.

So far 115 of the 221 dogs are alive and doing well. It is hoped they will become beloved pets to excellent families.

Despite being a United States territory and having the same animal rights laws, enforcement of them in Puerto Rico is lax.

“In the early 2000s they were infamous for throwing dogs off the cliffs,” Duffy said. “Dog packs, cock fights and animal abuse were rampant.”

As for why she brought the puppies home with her, Duffy said she knew they would be better off on her porch getting sunshine and fresh air than in a kennel.

“They were pretty sick for two weeks,” she said. “It was great cause for celebration when their stools firmed up.”