

Doggie HAND-ME-DOWNS

WRITTEN BY SAM SCOTT AND JENNI DAVIES



There are a number of reasons that may force an owner to relinquish their pet; there may be behavioural issues or a family member could suffer from pet allergies. However, most times the reason people give for surrendering their pet is that they are moving to a new home where no animals are permitted, or they are pregnant and are concerned that their pet may react badly to the new arrival or that the animal may pose a hygiene risk.

While some may go to the effort of ensuring that their pet is rehomed with a suitable and loving family, a worrying trend has started to emerge. Owners are simply giving their pets away, like hand-me-downs, to anyone who will take them off their hands; even to those in their employ, who may not be financially or even emotionally prepared to take care of an animal.

Giving animals to those in especially

low-income areas places an extra burden on the welfares already working in those communities to assist people with their pets. Consider the additional strain this constant influx of such animals puts on the welfare organisations tackling the immense problem of neglect and abuse in these areas.

According to Jenna, a volunteer with a township animal welfare group near Cape Town, most often these unwanted pets are given to folk in the townships by people residing in the affluent suburbs. "We are the ones who end up sterilising, vaccinating and treating the various injuries and diseases that these animals often struggle with, such as mange, biliary, burns, or being hit by cars. Many are euthanised as the new owners lack the knowledge, resources or inclination to care for them properly. These animals (especially pure-breds and house dogs) don't survive township life. In the end, it's the welfare worker who has to hold

your pet as it is put to sleep. It breaks our hearts," says Jenna.

WHY YOU SHOULD NOT GIVE YOUR PET AWAY

If you can no longer care for your pets, giving them away for free to someone you think will care for them may seem like the right choice, but there are good reasons not to.

Sadly, there are people who prey on those just wanting to find their animals a good home. They may try to play on your sympathies and lie about not being able to afford an adoption fee. However, chances are that if they can't afford an adoption fee, they can't afford to properly care for your pet.

Consider that your pet may well end up on the streets, neglected, mistreated and open to abuse, illness and death. Dog theft in these areas is high and they are often stolen for breeding or as bait dogs in the fighting rings. Welfare organisations are constantly treating dogs that are struck by cars or attacked by other dogs; dogs are poisoned, used as breeding machines or spend the rest of their lives on a chain.

Recently, an owner made the ill-fated decision to give their family pet, a Dachshund, to their domestic worker, who promised that it would



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Photograph by Helen White



After years of loyalty, these family pets were simply discarded



The Spaniels' first outing after being groomed

Photograph by Shelley Cooper

be well looked after and would even sleep in the bed with her children and go to school with them. They regularly gave the domestic worker food for the dog, yet when Four Paws was contacted by a concerned member of the public, they found the Daxie emaciated and covered in fleas, living under a piece of corrugated iron, exposed to the rain and cold. She had had two puppies, but sadly one had already died, and the other was malnourished and had a severe case of worms.

This owner handed over an unsterilised dog that was accustomed to a loving home and regular meals to someone who could not afford to feed her proper food, deworm or de-flea her, supply her with basic shelter or have her sterilised, resulting in the birth of another two unwanted puppies. After removing the dog, Four Paws followed up with a letter to the original owner to inform him of the outcome of his actions and to educate him to the dangers of passing one's pet along into a potentially dangerous situation. He explained that his children had given the domestic worker their dog and that she must have fed them lies to make them believe that she intended taking good care of it.

In 2012, two Spaniels were found by Hellen of Hellen Working in the Community while she was doing her rounds in a lower income area in Johannesburg South. Beaten and starved, they were eking out an existence in a hollow beneath the house, a shelter made with bricks and just a sheet of planking to protect them from the elements. The owner then happily surrendered the pair to the first person who asked for them, thankfully being Hellen, and said they really couldn't afford to keep them anyway. The Spaniels had been given to her when her employer got divorced. The original owner was

probably quite pleased to be rid of the problem, not sparing a thought to where they would end up or the conditions they would spend their lives in.

These two were fortunate to escape a grim future and were immediately taken to a place of safety and placed into care. Shelley Cooper volunteered to foster them, where they were rehabilitated and nursed back to health. Romeo and Juliet have since found a wonderful forever home with Dorette van Sittert and her family.

THE HORROR FACING THROWAWAY PETS

Unfortunately, not all discarded pets are as lucky as Romeo and Juliet, and this happens more often than you would think. As well-intentioned as they are, many people in low-income areas do not have the financial means or transportation to provide their pets with basic health care or veterinary treatment. Dogs that are ill or injured die a long, slow and painful death. Sterilisation is unaffordable, resulting in litter after litter of unwanted puppies being born. Providing shelter is not a priority, if even considered at all. Dogs rarely sleep inside and are left exposed to the elements with no sanctuary to protect them from theft or attack by people or other animals.

Why dog owners think it would be acceptable to give their pet away like a second-hand piece of clothing is hard to explain. What we do know is that if you no longer want your pet, for whatever reason, there are other options available to you.

DESTINATION DANGER

A common misconception is that people in townships or informal settlements do not care about animals. This couldn't be further from the truth, with many having great love and respect for their furry family



Photograph by Izel Groenewald

members. Sometimes an employee likes the dog, or even feels they have to take it, for fear of upsetting their employer. The problem is not necessarily with the person – it lies with the environment.

Having worked extensively in impoverished communities, Denay Saunders (founder of Uitsig Animal Rescue Centre) knows that these people usually cannot afford to feed animals properly or access veterinary care, be it due to financial pressure, lack of transport, or both. Your pet may end up underweight, or living on potato peels and “mieliepap”, which in turn leads to ill health.

Dogs roaming the streets are the norm due to the absence of proper walls or fences, putting them at risk of injury, abuse or theft. A popular “solution” for this is chaining or tethering the dog to a handy pole or fence.

Although it isn't something any animal lover wants to consider, the reality is that impoverished areas worldwide are hotbeds of animal abuse and neglect. Welfare organisations regularly treat dogs

that have been struck by cars, stabbed, burnt with boiling water or oil, poisoned, or attacked by other dogs. Mange infestation, biliary (“tick fever”) and severe flea, worm and tick infestations are common. Many dogs live out their lives at the end of a chain, and dog theft (for breeding or fighting rings) is rife.

Saunders adds that, whereas most township dogs are well-socialised and able to cope with harsh, chaotic township conditions, those from suburban home environments invariably lack these social skills and aren’t “streetwise”. This makes the new home a confusing and terrifying place.

BETTER ALTERNATIVES

The sad truth is that sometimes people have no choice but to surrender their pets due to circumstances beyond their control. Should you ever find yourself in this difficult position, remember that there are other options available to you, safeguarding your pet’s future and giving you peace of mind. Finding a new forever home for your dog is a process which cannot be avoided; short cuts could be fatal. As our pets’ guardians we owe it to them to do the right thing.

If you have a pure-bred dog, there are many breed-specific rescue and rehoming organisations that can assist in placing your pet with a qualifying family anywhere in the country. They will carry out the home inspections and screen potential adopters to ensure that they are able and willing to provide a safe, responsible and loving home for your pet.

Be sure that the organisations’ current animal residents are well cared for, that they screen potential adopters, insist on home inspections, and offer post-adoption support.

Network through friends, neighbours and local veterinarians. Some rescue groups may only be able to

offer a courtesy Facebook post, but this would entail you keeping your pet while they network your pet. Some may even allow you to approve the potential adopter or attend their adoption events.

If homing through an organisation, always provide honest facts about your dog; its temperament, its likes and dislikes, etc. This gives the organisation a greater chance of successfully rehoming them permanently.

If homing privately, always carry out a home check and do follow-up visits – a lot can change in a short time. Visit their home and meet the rest of the family without your dog (taking someone with you for safety). Find out if there are other animals and who is responsible for their care. Where will the animals live? Will they be left chained outside or treated as part of the family? Do not be afraid to ask questions – your pet’s life and happiness depends on it.

If potential adopters refuse a home visit, alarm bells should ring. Do not place your pet with anyone who refuses to let you visit their home. If you are re-homing a “bully breed” (Pit Bulls, Boerboels, etc.) do not allow people to come to your home as these dogs are at high risk of being stolen.

Charge an adoption fee to discourage “chancers”. When people pay a fee, they are more likely to give careful consideration to following through with the adoption and will be less likely to take your pet on a whim, only to drop them off at a shelter, or worse, when the novelty of having a new pet wears off.

Ask for references – and call all their references and enquire if they have taken good care of their pets. Did their pets die of natural causes, or did they seem to disappear after a few weeks?

Ask for a vet reference – speak to their veterinarian and ask about the family’s other pets and how well they were cared for. You can at least



establish whether they have a good relationship with the vet and whether they would recommend the family as good guardians.

MAKING SURE THAT YOUR LOYAL PET IS SAFE

Be prepared to take the animal back – even if you have taken all the necessary steps in trying to ensure a good match, accept that other unforeseen factors may see your pet being returned to you: a family member has a previously unknown allergy or perhaps your dog doesn’t get along with their other pets. Be sure to let them know that you are willing to take the animal back if it doesn’t work out, to avoid your beloved pet ending up on a shelter’s doorstep, or worse, cast out onto the street.

Never, ever give your pet to a stranger, no matter how nice they seem.

Under no circumstances should you give your pet away for free – particularly to someone you do not know, or who works for you and may not have the resources to look after the animal. This is particularly true for breeds which require extra care, such as those with hip dysplasia or skin folds requiring daily cleaning, and for “at risk” breeds like Pit Bulls. The new owners may be unprepared for the responsibility of pet ownership, and/or may not be in a financial position to ensure the best care, nutrition and environment for the dog.

Never resort to dumping your dog assuming that it will take care of itself, or consider leaving your pet behind when you are moving, in the hope that someone will find it and take care of it. 🐾