

Wish you were here

The SPCA hopes its vacation-themed look will lure potential dog owners to its shelter



The theme for this kennel is a trip to the art museum. Canine art includes a play on Edvard Munch's "The Scream."

Sun photo by Elizabeth Malby, July 24, 2007

Article by John Woestendiek | Sun reporter, July 25, 2007

As any ex-con can tell you, it's no easy task to create a warm and cozy personal space in a place where steel doors clang shut all day and the scent of disinfectant wafts up from concrete floors. Homey ambience and maximum security don't easily mix.

But the staff at the Maryland Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals didn't let that stop them from taking rows of sterile-looking kennels, filled with dozens of homeless dogs, and turning the space into a vacation-themed wonderland.

The transformation - from institutional drab to brightly exotic - is temporary, part of a monthlong promotion designed to get people into the animal shelter at 3300 Falls Road in Hampden and make them linger there a little longer.

The idea is the longer they stay, the more likely they will leave with a dog.

Early indications are that it might just be working.

Last week, one long-timer - a skinny shepherd mix named Bear - was adopted by a family that paused in front of his "Arizona" kennel, decorated with rocks, cacti and a floor-to-ceiling painting of the Grand Canyon.

"A lot of people think of an animal shelter as a sad, dreary, upsetting sort of place they wouldn't want to go to," said Jess Garriss, the front-office supervisor who decorated Bear's temporary home. "It's a nice surprise for the public, especially first-time visitors, to come see it all decorated."

Called "Dog Days of Summer," the promotion was the idea of Maya Richmond, the Maryland SPCA's director of program development and operations. It started last year, with an "extreme makeover" theme, and returned this month when, once again, the whole staff was invited to come up with a vacation spot and decorate a kennel.

The catch? No more than \$2 could be spent per kennel.

With the limited budget, many staff members resorted to scrounging, bringing in items they had at home or, as was the case with Garriss, creating original artwork.

At first glance

Garriss chose to decorate the first cage visitors see when they enter the kennel area, one usually occupied by one of the more difficult-to-place dogs - a long-timer, older dog, or one that, slightly lower on the cute scale, takes a little longer to make its charms apparent.

"That first kennel is where we usually put dogs that are not flashy, so I thought it would be nice to have something eye-catching in there," Garriss said.

A painting and psychology major in college, she took a piece of her most heavy-duty canvas, found some old photos from a childhood trip to the Grand Canyon and painted a vibrant scene of the canyon at sunset.

"I had the day off and just painted it in a day," said Garriss, 27, who has worked at the shelter since January. "I'm a little bit embarrassed by it. It's not such a 'grand' work of art."

Bear seemed to like it, though, as does Piper, the hound that moved into kennel No. 1 upon Bear's departure last week.

Among the other tourist destinations depicted are Las Vegas, Hawaii, Egypt, Japan, Ocean City and one fictional one, from Harry Potter, Hogwarts, or, in this case, Dogwarts. The decorations will be up through Tuesday.

One kennel has been turned into a campsite, complete with a doghouse/tent, and its occupant has taken to spending most of the day in a hammock-type chair that is part of the scene.

Another kennel, depicting Germany, has photos of German architecture, a German flag and a string of cardboard bratwurst across the ceiling.

Sombreros and chili peppers dangle from the top of the Mexico kennel, and beads and costume masks run across the front of the kennel decorated as New Orleans during Mardi Gras.

Visitors to the SPCA are invited to cast votes for the best-decorated kennels, and the winners will be posted on the SPCA's Web site, which includes links to photos of the decorated kennels and two Web cams, one of which is pointed at the Grand Canyon kennel.

Garriss coated the Grand Canyon painting in a sealer to protect it from water when the kennels are hosed down. Those turning the kennels into vacation spots had to use items that were waterproof, washable and not hazardous to the dogs.

Garriss spent no money, and said her co-worker on the project may have spent a dollar or two on the green foam from which cacti were cut out.

While the staff gets a kick out of the annual decorating, Garriss said the dogs probably get the most out of it.



Getting second looks

"I think it benefits most the dogs that people wouldn't necessarily stop to look at, the dogs that are a little less flashy or don't catch people's eyes initially. This might make people stop and look and check out the dog."

The only hardship the program poses is on the cleaning staff, who have to spend a lot more time cleaning around the decorations. (The cat area of the shelter is not part of the program.)

"It's silly and fun and a pleasant surprise for visitors, but it's also a way to help with adoptions," said Aileen Gabbey, executive director of the Maryland SPCA. "With more people coming in - and telling their friends to come in - there are more adoptions."

Sometimes, she said, just lingering a couple of minutes longer may make the difference between a family's leaving empty-handed or going home with a dog.

On top of improving the animals' chances of getting adopted, the decorations seem to make the dogs a little happier while they are in the shelter, Gabbey said.

"I think the dogs really like it. ... When you add something they can really interact with, like a tent or a hammock, it makes it a little more homey for them," she said.

Doggone changes

The Maryland SPCA's new hours, effective this week, are 2:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Monday and Tuesday; noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; and noon to 3:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through Tuesday, as part of the SPCA's "Dog Days" program, all cats and dogs will be spayed or neutered at no charge, and all dog adopters will receive coupons for a free dog bath and \$3 off purchases at Pet Depot.

To learn more about the Maryland SPCA, visit mdspca.org

To see the SPCA's Web cam, visit mdspca.org/adoption/petcam.html

john.woestendiek@baltsun.com

Baltimore Sun, 7/25/2007, C1 & C2