

Bringing the Holidays Home

In the nation's capital, a few humane officers spend Christmas bringing toys to forgotten pooches

BY CARRIE ALLAN



CARRIE ALLAN/THE HSUS

Officer Ann Russell of the Washington Humane Society pays a visit to one of the guard dogs who has benefited from the shelter's winter holiday delivery program.

In Washington, D.C., the winter holidays are a mixed bag. Politicians have flown back home, so Capitol grounds are quieter. The days hover just around freezing but are typically snowless. Lights and glowing plastic Santas decorate some neighborhoods, while other parts of the city remain dark, the only decorations the graffiti on the walls of abandoned businesses. Shoppers fight for parking spaces, kitchens fill with tantalizing smells, and families gather to celebrate and bicker.

Meanwhile, in lots around the nation's capital, dozens of guard dogs do not know it's Christmastime at all. For them, it's just another day tethered in a rocky lot or pacing a chain-link fence patrolling for intruders—or

so it was until, more than 10 years ago, a humane officer from the Washington Humane Society decided to play Santa.

While making his rounds back then, Adam Parascandola was struck by the city's guard dogs. Now the director of animal cruelty issues at The Humane Society of the United States, Parascandola saw them as the loneliest of animals. "Most of them are really sweet, and they just want attention," he says.

He began to take toys and treats to them, eventually making the practice an official shelter program during the holidays. Parascandola doesn't have kids, so he tried to work on Christmas Day so officers with fami-

lies could stay home. Delivering the toys then was both symbolic and practical: Few people were around, allowing him to check on the dogs' health and well-being without getting into an argument with their sometimes less-than-friendly owners.

When Parascandola took a new job in California, others stepped in to play elf. "We start making notes a couple months before Christmas. We make a list and we check it twice," jokes humane officer Ann Russell.

On Christmas Day, a small cadre—sometimes accompanied by partners or spouses to make the ritual more fun—divide the city into quadrants and head out to the lots on their list. Instead of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they bring treasures dogs will actually enjoy—usually donated Kongs, stuffed with frozen peanut butter and treats—and drop them off with animals who, on Christmas Day, may not see a single soul, much less get so much as a scratch behind the ears.

Because many dogs were used to patrol the lots, a citywide crackdown on black market car sales has had an unintended but welcome effect, Russell is happy to report: reduction in the number of guard dogs. "It's interesting to see that connection between different types of crime and how one getting reduced affects another."

Once on a checkup of a dog who hadn't been visited in a while, Russell and a fellow officer found a vacant lot. Her colleague remembered seeing poorly treated animals there, but now saw only remnants of the pens, including the elevated wood pallet where a makeshift doghouse had once stood.

But the most poignant sign of the previous tenants was a single, chewed-up Kong toy, delivered by Washington Humane Society officers on a previous Christmas. It was, Russell says, probably the only toy those dogs ever got. [AS](#)