

Reclaiming the Christmas Puppy

Forget the pet store: Ottawa Humane is doing it right

BY CARRIE ALLAN

Every kid, at one point or another, probably had dreams of finding a new puppy in a big, beribboned box under the Christmas tree.

Every kid, of course, except Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and the millions of other children in the world for whom the 25th of December is just another day.

For years, the idea of a puppy for Christmas made shelters shudder—the myth being that the holidays were far too hectic to even think of bringing a new pet into the home, and that holiday puppies were bound to be headed to the shelter soon after they popped adorably out of their beautifully wrapped boxes. But the Ottawa Humane Society has rediscovered the joys of the Santa-delivered pet. And as it happens, it's often folks of other faiths who are playing elf.

"I'll tell you, the humane movement, if there's one message we got out there, it's 'Don't adopt an animal at Christmas,'" says Bruce Roney, executive director of Ottawa Humane, located in the Canadian province of Ontario. "And you know, given people's lifestyles now, with smaller families and such, for some people Christmas is one of the only times of the year when they can take some time off and handle a new puppy. And if you're not having a hundred people coming and going from your house, it may be a perfectly good time to adopt. So it's a little bit about overcoming that, and it's a little bit about the good will in the community, and it's always nice to place more animals."

Adoptions are still screened, Roney emphasizes—the only difference is that the kids don't have to participate in the screening. "We make sure the dogs and cats are good with children," he says. "We do actually test the animals with other children—just not the ones the puppy is going to, so it can still be a surprise."

The shelter has a fairly diverse mix of staff and volunteers, Roney says, and that's been particularly helpful for a program that involves working on Christmas Day when the



In the early hours of Christmas Day in 2009, Josh Silverman made one of Ottawa Humane's first Christmas puppy deliveries to then 10-year-old Darien Oldford.

"Santas" begin picking up the animals to deliver as early as 6 in the morning.

Asked whether she was OK working on Christmas, Ottawa Humane's manager of major gifts laughs. "My last name is Silverman—does that give you a clue?" says Anna Silverman, who's helped with deliveries since the program started a few years back.

Silverman recruited her 24-year-old son Josh to help out, too, though when she pitched him on the idea, she left out the fact that they'd be getting up at the crack of dawn. "When he agreed, he didn't realize it was that early. So I called and said, 'I'm picking you up tomorrow morning at 5,' and he was like 'Whaaa?'"

But she says Josh quickly got in the mood once they made the first drop-off.

Typically, she says, the kids in the family have been wanting a pet, but the parents have engaged in a little disinformation campaign, "telling the kids that it's not good timing, not this year," she says. "And then you walk in and there's so much screaming and smiles and happiness and it's so cool. ... Honest to God,

listen: When a 24-year-old kid says he doesn't mind getting up at 5 in the morning? He told me, 'I cannot believe how good this makes me feel.' And we did it again last year."

And Christians (and members of other faiths) can return the favor on other religious holidays. "We actually did a Hanukah delivery last year," Roney says.

The local media love the program—it's a perfect warm fuzzy story for what's typically a slow news day, he says—and often follow shelter representatives around as they make deliveries of the animals. It really puts the shelter in the right light for the community, says Roney.

Should all shelters be rethinking old myths like "don't adopt black cats near Halloween" and "don't adopt pets at Christmastime"? Can we save more lives by using those holidays to do things right, keeping the celebration but adding some responsible pet owner education?

(Let's just not start getting too literal about Groundhog Day. You know someone out there wants one.) **AS**