

LOCATION: Cottonwood, Alabama

ANIMALS SAVED: 63 Dogo Argentinos, two French bulldogs and one German shepherd

IT WAS A TENSE SITUATION, working in the middle of a cornfield with one officer standing guard. A black truck suddenly barreled down the driveway. In true *COPS* fashion, the officer pointed his rifle at the truck, yelling, “STOP!”

Everyone went for cover.

The driver inched out of the truck, lay on the ground and was handcuffed.

Without batting a collective eye, HSUS rescuers and volunteers picked up where they’d left off that mid-January day, scooping up dogs so skinny each bone showed in their tails.

The HSUS became aware of the breeding operation when the Cottonwood Police Department called about dogs being bred for hog-dog fights. Pitting dogs against feral hogs became illegal in Alabama in 2005, but the practice has since gone underground. The investigation took an urgent turn when officers discovered dozens of starving Dogo Argentinos.

Dogs were scattered throughout the property, with no food or water and little to no cover. “Being that underweight made the cold weather intolerable,” says Chris Schindler, HSUS manager of animal fighting investigations.

Only a few dogs had protection from the elements, like several who had crawled inside a dilapidated car, a lame French bulldog in the man’s home and nine puppies in an enclosed porch. Rescuers fished the puppies out one at a time. While waiting for a vet, the runt snuggled under Schindler’s beard.

At the temporary shelter, the dogs were given medical care and placed on a high-calorie diet.

The elderly bulldog, nicknamed Murray, showed improvement with the new food and pain and heart medications. A few weeks later, as HSUS field rescuer Jennifer Kulina-Lanese cleaned spilled water from his bowl, Murray tried to play. “Tears welled up in my eyes,” she says, because he actually felt well enough for his personality to emerge. “He knew love.”



ANIMAL RESCUE TEAM VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

// BY SARAH KOWALSKI

AFTER RETIRING from a decades-long career as an animal control officer and cruelty investigator, Sheila Sapp still felt called to work with animals.

So she began volunteering with the HSUS Animal Rescue Team, helping with disaster relief (first after Hurricane Katrina, then again after Superstorm Sandy) and also with puppy mill, dog-fighting and hoarding rescues.

“I’ve seen some really incredible things,” says Sapp, who points particularly to the work with those animals who have had minimal or abusive human interaction. “You get to just sit with them and gain their trust. And the first time they curl up in your lap, it’s a feeling you can’t describe.”

Sapp lives in Bennett, North Carolina, where she and her husband have a “mini-sanctuary” of sorts for rescued animals, including 14 chickens, five peacocks, two dogs and a cat. She also volunteers for several breed rescue groups and has fostered countless pets. “It’s just something I was meant to do.”

IN THIS ONGOING SERIES, we feature Animal Rescue Team volunteers whose efforts make our work possible.



Rescue team member Chris Schindler carries a Dogo Argentino to safety.

ON THE iPad: See more images from this rescue.

OPPOSITE PAGE: JAMIE OSBORNE/AP IMAGES FOR THE HSUS; THIS PAGE: FROM LEFT: WATHY MILANI/THE HSUS; LISA J. GODFREY/FOR THE HSUS