

## Hurricane refugees wag up a storm

Kennel takes in dogs left homeless by Katrina until new families are found

By **KATE PERRY AND MARC PARRY**, Staff writers

First published: Monday, October 10, 2005

EAST NASSAU -- They spent days traveling north in a truck stacked with 39 dogs. But on Sunday, the Labrador retrievers tussled in the fresh air of an open yard, sniffing the pebbles, nibbling each others' ears and chasing a tennis ball.

"They're not barking," said Lynne Burns, who is housing the dogs at her Pondviews Country Kennels here. "They're not aggressive. They're sweethearts."

The four dogs -- Tsao, Champ, Joe and Dixie -- had their lives upended in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Burns and her husband, Bob, are fostering the retrievers at their kennel until new families are picked to adopt them.

The other 35 dogs on the truck were placed with other rescuers.

Based on U.S. Census numbers, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimated that 464,419 cats and dogs were displaced by Hurricane Katrina along with their families, but the organization is unsure how many animals were left homeless by the catastrophe.

A national organization called Labs4Rescue placed the Labrador retrievers with Bob and Lynne Burns. The organization takes labs from shelters and steers them to foster homes until permanent homes can be found for them.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, the organization was flooded with requests to take in dogs in Louisiana and Mississippi and turned to its volunteers across the country to find foster homes.

The four evacuated retrievers would likely have been put to death had it not been for the agency's intervention, Bob Burns said. Once they're adopted, he and his wife plan to foster more canine Katrina evacuees, week after week, as many as they can.

"These are some really sweet dogs," Burns said outside his kennel. "You hate to see a puppy like that being euthanized."

The two yellow-coated puppies, Champ and Tsao, were the friskiest Sunday. The roughly 5-month-old dogs collided in midair, turned the yard into a racetrack and wagged their tails at warp speed. Joe, a golden-eyed, 14-month-old chocolate lab, also got in on the action.

Then Meagan Mahaly Burns, 15, tossed them a muddy green flying disc. All three took a good whiff of it. Not one retrieved it.

"Come on, dude!" she said. "You're supposed to pick it up and bring it back, not sniff it!"

Taking on the labs was a familiar task for Bob, a correction officer, and Lynne, a nurse. The East Nassau residents have fostered German shepherds for more than 10 years at their pet boarding facility. The shepherds come to them from bad home situations or have been abandoned. The couple care for the dogs until a good home is found.

Over the years, Bob Burns said, they've rescued between 40 and 50 shepherds.

When the hurricane hit, they contacted the state's chapter of the ASPCA and offered to foster animals that had been displaced by the hurricane. They never heard anything specific back. But they got in touch with Labs4Rescue through a customer who knew Deborah Robertson, an Albany lawyer who had adopted her lab, SuzyQ, through the agency.

"We wanted to help out in some way," Bob Burns said. "I actually feel more comfortable bringing the dogs in, playing with them, and giving them a good home than just writing a check and sending it down there."

Lynne Burns suspects that the desire many have to help out those affected by the faraway calamity will have the labs with new families quickly. In the week since the couple found out they would be taking in the dogs, 10 families have called asking about adoption.

Several companies in the area, such as veterinary clinics and pet supply stores, are also showing interest in the dogs, offering discount services and products to the Burns family or the dogs' new families to aid in their care.

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At the base of the Burns' driveway a large sign, also donated, reads "Hurricane Katrina Pet Relocation Center."

To adopt the dogs from Labs4Rescue, adopters have to fill out a lengthy application, submit to a home visit, and pay a nonrefundable \$350 adoption fee. The fee covers the cost of a spaying or neutering and other veterinary services. Prospective adopters can visit the dogs at the Burns' kennel.

It's a pleasure hosting the dogs at the kennel, Bob Burns said, but the ultimate reward comes when they find a new home.

"When you have people that call you and say, 'The dog is the best addition to our family,' it's great," he said.

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