PIT BULLS: City won court battle

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overturned. Other dogs are up for adoption. About 35 have found new homes, and a group of 10 was recently transported to Tennessee, where they were promised homes.

"She just feels like she's keeping God's creatures safe," Sonya Dias says of Toni Phillips. Dias is a member of The Pit Bull B.A.N.D. (Breed Awareness, Not Discrimination), a group fighting the ban in Denver; Anderson is Dias' aunt.

Dias' dog, Gryffindor, has been at Mariah's Promise for months as Dias tries to sell her home in Denver.

People who aren't dog lovers don't understand the bond that builds between canine and human, says Dias, who works at a mortgage company.

"Plenty of people I work with say, 'You're going to move for a dog?' Well, yeah."

MORE MONEY NEEDED

Toni and Mike Phillips have been helping dogs since they started rescuing abandoned dogs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area 15 years ago.

"We didn't wake up one day and say we're going to rescue dogs," Toni Phillips says. But when she became aware of people dumping dogs in the countryside, she began her rescue efforts. Mike soon followed her lead. They continued their dog-saving ways when they moved to Missouri in 1992.

The couple moved to Colorado in late 1998, living in Black Forest for about six months before moving to Teller County. Mike runs a sheet-metal company in Colorado Springs.

The two opened Mariah's Promise, named after an abandoned puppy they had taken in, in September 2003. Mariah died of parvo virus while they were negotiating to buy the land. The "promise" part of Mariah's Promise is a realization, Phillips says, that they can't save every animal, "but all that we can, we will."

The sanctuary doesn't have an outside shelter for housing dogs on cold nights in the mountains. Before the wave of pit bulls, the couple brought in all their dogs at night, with an average of 35 dogs sleeping in their 1,700-square-foot house. If the pit-bull ban had taken effect in the dead of winter, "we would not have been able to take the dogs in," she says.

To remedy the problem, they plan to build a series of 10-foot-by-10-foot, climate-controlled dog houses that Mike Phillips designed.

"We were in the process of that when the pit-bull thing hit," Toni Phillips says.

The MaxFund, a Denver no-kill shelter, provided seed money for the project, though more funding is needed. Toni Phillips, an advocate of curbing pet overpopulation, also worked with MaxFund's outreach program last year to hold two low-cost spay-and-neuter clinics in Teller County. She became involved in the pit-bull rescue through MaxFund.

The ban, which carries a penalty of up to a $1,000 fine and a year in jail for people harboring pit bulls, first went into effect in 1991. Denver suspended enforcement last year after state lawmakers passed a measure prohibiting breed-specific bans on dogs. After Denver prevailed in a court battle over the state law, it resumed enforcement of the ban May 9.

"I really thought Denver would not carry it as far as it has," Toni Phillips says.

A VICIOUS CYCLE

Lauren Fox, executive director of Colorado Springs All Breed Rescue, says the group has gotten numerous calls from Denver pit-bull owners seeking refuge for their dogs. Its ability to help is limited — All Breed Rescue is a small group and doesn't have a shelter — so it refers callers to Mariah's Promise.

"They're the ones really feeling the brunt of it," Fox says.

Fox has an 11-year-old pit bull, Obsidian, that is a certified therapy dog. She worries the Denver ban will add to pit bulls' macho, outlaw reputation. They'll become more and more the province of dog owners who don't care about the law or about spaying or neutering and training their dogs. That, in turn, will lead to more pit-bull attacks, she fears.

The Denver ordinance says pit bulls have "a genetic predisposition to aggressiveness." "They're not born any different than any other dog," Fox says.

Any dog can pose a danger if not properly trained and socialized, Toni Phillips says. The dogs at Mariah's Promise, she says, are loving dogs who were loyal family pets.

"The dogs being used for fighting and baiting and drugs and all that stuff, those dogs are being kept God knows where." The owners of those dogs, she says, "they're going to break the law anyway. They don't give a rip what an ordinance in Denver says."

People who sneak pit bulls out of Denver are law-breakers as well. The law allows for transport of pit bulls through Denver, but only from a starting point outside of Denver.

Although Dias hasn't had any encounters with police while transporting dogs, "it's still really scary. If you've got a dog in the car, it just seems like every time you do, you pass like a hundred policemen."

The rescue effort has slowed in recent weeks.

"I guess maybe people have gotten the dogs out or are hiding them," Anderson says. "We've talked to a lot of people who say, 'I've got my shades drawn, my door locked, and I'm not giving my dog up.'"

The burden has eased on those directing the rescue effort, but the work at Mariah's Promise is just beginning, Anderson says. Toni and Mike Phillips are left with housing and feeding the Denver refugees and finding them homes.

Anderson praises Toni Phillips for "walking the walk."

"I know a million people who talk the talk — 'I want to help, I want to do this' — but. Toni does it. She does it."

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0272 or comics@gazette.com

PIT-BULL FACTS

- **"Pit bull" has become** a generic term for several breeds of dogs, though there is disagreement over whether they are indeed different breeds. Denver's ban covers American pit-bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers and any dogs displaying most physical traits of any of these breeds.
- **Miami and Cincinnati** are other major U.S. metropolitan areas that ban pit bulls. A provincewide pit-bull ban recently took effect in Ontario, Canada.
- **A study by** the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the Humane Society of the United States, published in 2000, found Rottweilers and pit-bull types are responsible for most human deaths from dog bites. The study, however, noted that several factors affect a dog's propensity to bite and suggested alternatives to breed-specific ordinances.
- **Attacks by pit bulls** seriously injured more than 20 people in Colorado between 1984 and May 1989, according to information at the Denver government Web site. Among the victims was 3-year-old Fernando Salazar, who was fatally mauled by a pit bull in southwest Denver in October 1986.
- **According to figures** from the American Temperament Testing Society, a national nonprofit organization that promotes uniform temperament evaluations of dogs, the American pit-bull terrier passed its evaluations 83.4 percent of the time, just behind the golden retriever at 83.6.

BILL RADFORD, THE GAZETTE

'Off the Chain' will open audience's eyes about world of pit-bull fighting

By BILL RADFORD
THE GAZETTE

REVIEW

"Off the Chain," a documentary just released on DVD by Ardustry Home Entertainment, casts a spotlight into dark corners to profile the world of pit-bull fighting.

It's no surprise that it's a world that's bloody and horrific. What is eye-opening is the attitude of the owners and trainers who participate in what they call a sport and what others see as a betrayal of man's best friend.

Director Bobby J. Brown spent three years infiltrating the subculture and gaining the trust of the professional "dog men." They profess a love for their dogs, but that love seems to last only as long as their dogs don't "disgrace" them. And that love is expressed by sending the dogs to butcher or be butchered.

One of the dog men sharpens his dog's teeth until they're razor-sharp.

"This sport is not hurting anybody," he says. But the film is unflinching in its portrayal of dog fighting's ravages, including one pit bull with much of its face ripped off.

The fights can last minutes or hours. The fight scenes in "Off the Chain" are mercifully short for the most part but still deliver a brutal punch.

"Off the Chain" also offers a history of the American pit-bull terrier, once hailed as America's family dog for its devotion and intelligence. The film contrasts the dog-fighting world with responsible dog owners and the pit bulls they love; it blames humans for the pit bull's transformation in the eyes of many from loyal friend to public enemy. Whichever side you're on, the video is sure to engender some sympathy for the dogs.

The DVD can be ordered online at www.offthechainmovie.com for $14.95.

Mariah's Promise
Rescue Animal Funds'
Animal Sanctuary

4027 County Road 5
PO Box 1017
Divide, CO 80814

(719) 687-4568 cell (719) 651-4733

http://www.petfinder.com/shelters/co117.html

Mariah's Promise
All that we can, we will.