

SPCA toy drive to help depressed animals

Shelter animals need a Christmas treat, too

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Rhonda Sherwood was volunteering at the Vancouver branch of the B.C. SPCA shelter in 2007 when she came across a sad-looking pit bull nicknamed Dizzy.

Sherwood, a financial adviser and longtime SPCA volunteer, said the elderly Dizzy had been abandoned by his family and was showing signs of depression.

"He was this little pit bull who'd been there for a while, so the staff used to bring him up to reception so he could sit with them and not be so lonely," said Sherwood. "He looked so sad. Looking in his eyes just killed me."

Coincidentally, Sherwood had been reading how toys provide mental stimulation and distraction for animals struggling with depression and loneliness.

Sherwood noted the SPCA is a non-profit society and that most of its funding goes to animal welfare with little left over for luxuries like toys. With that in mind, she purchased a bag full of toys for the shelter's animals, including dogs, cats, rabbits, rats and gerbils.

"I was reading that toys can really stimulate the minds of rabbits, cats and dogs," said Sherwood. "And that can really help when an animal is feeling depression or loneliness brought on by being abandoned."

When Sherwood arrived at the shelter that day with her bag of toys, she made sure Dizzy was the first animal to get one--a big black squeaky ball, which the dog immediately nuzzled, mauled and chewed.

"I swear, when I gave him that ball his eyes lit up and there was real joy in them," she said. "And every time I came in after that Dizzy had his ball. If Dizzy was at reception, he had his ball. If Dizzy was in a kennel he had his ball."

Sherwood said the reaction from Dizzy made her a little "obsessive" in wanting to treat every SPCA shelter animal to a new toy, so last fall she launched the first annual B.C. SPCA Toy Drive. While people across the city were generous in their gifts, some were confused by the name and arrived at the shelter bearing toys for children. To combat that confusion, Sherwood changed the name this year to Toy Drive for the Animals.

A few weeks after that first toy drive, Sherwood arrived at the shelter to find Dizzy gone. She discovered a member of the pit bull rescue group HugABull took Dizzy home as part of the shelter's foster program. She found out later the volunteer

eventually fell in love with the pathetic pooch and adopted him.

Sherwood again wants to ensure all shelter animals have their own toys. She's asking pet lovers to bring good quality toys and food to their community shelter. Her wish list for the animals includes dry and tinned cat and dog food, toys for animals, cat and dog collars and leashes and Kongs, as well as old towels and blankets. Sherwood says catnip toys should not be donated.

"I bought some for the shelter cats thinking they'd enjoy them and that was a big mistake," Sherwood said, explaining that the cats got a little out of control. "You learn from your mistakes."

For rabbits and small animals, Sherwood is asking for quality food, cages and toys, including toilet paper rolls, children's plastic key sets, wicker tunnels and cardboard bunny runs.

Pets can have also have their picture taken with Santa that same day for a donation-- but no snakes or horses, please, at Santa's request.

In Vancouver, toys can be dropped off, and your pet's picture taken with Santa, Dec. 13 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the SPCA, 1205 East Seventh Ave.

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