

When the ASPCA seizes animals from dangerous situations, it's usually a few dogs or cats at a time—numbers that can be absorbed without undue disruption of standard operations. So when four dozen wire fox terriers are seized at once, it's anything but business as usual.

By Tina Traster

## "A"-Mazing Terrier Rescue

Life in the Cotton's New York City apartment is a little more complicated these days. There's a third mouth to feed, a lot more frolicking and less room on the bed every night as Tallulah wedges herself between Steve and Carol Cotton's pillows. And why not? It's not as if Tallulah has always had a family to spoil her. In fact, the three-year-old wire fox terrier—who now has doting human "parents" and two canine siblings—spent her first two years in misery. Tallulah is one of 49 purebred wire fox terriers seized by the ASPCA from a Bronx breeder who kept the dogs in squalid conditions. Tallulah was one of the younger dogs, dirty and unkempt, but not ailing. Most of the dogs, especially the older ones, suffered eye and ear infections, tooth abscesses, skin sores, severely matted hair and overgrown nails. Three had deformed limbs. Miraculously, after being rescued and given medical treatment at the ASPCA, all of the terriers found new homes.

### Search and Seizure

On March 18, 2003, ASPCA Humane Law Enforcement officers arrested Charles Horton, 38, and charged him with cruelty to animals. The breeder kept most of the dogs crammed two or three to a cage on two floors in a ramshackle house on Ampere Avenue in the Bronx. Some were discovered in a van on the property. The terriers, ranging in age from puppies to seniors, were covered in their own waste. Many were wearing sweaters that were so intertwined with matted coats and filth that they were almost attached like a layer of skin.

On the afternoon of the arrest, ASPCA officers waited for the society's 37-foot mobile clinic, normally used to perform spay/neuter surgeries in the city's outer boroughs, to arrive on the scene. A camera crew from Animal Planet, which has been filming the "A's" HLE officers at work for its *Animal Precinct* series, was on hand to document the entire rescue operation.

Horton's neighbors, who referred to him as "The Wolfman," gathered around and shared stories about the reclusive man who kept an unknown number of dogs who were never seen being walked or playing outside. ASPCA staff who entered the house, which had caved-in floorboards and no electricity, were overwhelmed by the stench of accumulated waste. "It's like walking into a dumpster," one veterinary tech commented.

While technicians in the van began triage, the dogs kept coming—and coming. No one could believe that 49 dogs had been living in the house. Law enforcement officers found cattle prods on the scene that bore tooth marks, supporting the suspicion that the prods were used to subjugate the dogs. To everyone's amazement, all of the dogs were alive.

Charles Horton was no stranger to the humane law enforcement officers. He ran the illicit operation with Charlotte Smith, who died two weeks before the arrest, but the pair had had dogs taken from them two years earlier. Smith also had a brush with the law when she illegally performed veterinary procedures on a dog who later died. It was Smith's death that prompted ASPCA agent Henry Ruiz to visit the Ampere Street house on March 18.

This time Horton was charged with 49 counts of animal cruelty, a misdemeanor. He could face up to a year in jail and a \$1,000 fine per count if and when his case goes to trial.

### Facing the Challenge

Inside the mobile clinic, agents and clinicians worked as fast as they could to soothe the dogs and make them as comfortable as possible. Many dogs squinted in the unaccustomed daylight. They were disoriented and spooked by all the activity, but none were aggressive. "Their sweet temperaments amazed everyone," says Stephen Musso, senior vice president and chief of operations at the ASPCA. "Dogs found in a

hoarding situation are usually antisocial and difficult to manage, and their future becomes euthanasia."

Against all odds, the story of the 49 wire fox terriers has a fairytale ending. Forty-eight of the dogs—even the elderly and those with deformities and blindness—have new homes. One terrier was euthanized for liver failure several months after being rescued. And the total count actually rose to 54; a pregnant female delivered a litter of five puppies while in the shelter.

The seizure of the wire fox terriers presented a sizeable challenge to the ASPCA. It taxed the agency's manpower and physical space, as well as its coffers. Groomers and veterinarians bore the brunt of the initial work. But for the ensuing six months, the care and maintenance of the animals fell to the already-stressed staff, including new hires and volunteers, who prepared the dogs for adoption with behavioral training and applicant screening.

"This was an awful lot of animals to take in all at once," says Musso, "but everyone rallied together. People worked long, hard hours. We did everything we had to do."

### First Things First

The dogs arrived at the ASPCA shelter late Tuesday afternoon as most employees were getting ready to leave for the day. First, the staff assembled cages in rooms not normally used for animal holding. Calls and e-mails went out to bring in volunteers. Many responded. None of the animals appeared critically ill, but each had to be evaluated. Blood samples were taken, and weights, age estimates and other documentation were recorded to build the legal case against the breeder. Each dog needed to be photographed for the case. Groomers then had the painstaking task of cutting sweaters off the dogs who were wearing them, clipping grossly overgrown nails and shaving most of the dogs down to the skin.

"This is the only place where they could have come and where what happened in the end—good medical care and being adopted—could have happened," says Robert Reisman, D.V.M., a veterinarian at the ASPCA's Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital and the coordinator for abuse cases.

In the following days, Reisman and other veterinarians at Bergh Memorial treated most of the dogs for ear and eye infections. Many needed dental work, too, and three of the females had mammary tumors removed. All of the intact males and females were neutered or spayed. One dog, who was deaf and blind, had congenitally deformed rear legs and was estimated to be about 12 years of age, had four teeth extracted and was treated for painful ear and urinary tract infections. "The physical care scale score for this dog is *terrible*," wrote Reisman in his case notes for dog #5, subsequently named Chanel for Chanel No. 5 perfume. "We gave him a reasonable quality of life, considering," he adds.

### Foster Care-giving

When news about the seizure broke, volunteers came out of the woodwork, donations came in and the phones rang off the hook with people wanting to adopt the little dogs.

Carol Cotton remembers hearing the horrific news a week after the rescue. She and her husband, who already had two wire fox terriers, joined the ranks of volunteers who walked

the dogs, cleaned cages and offered the kind of attention and affection the neglected canines had never had.

Over time, the Cottons became smitten with a particular dog and wanted to adopt her. Unfortunately, the ASPCA couldn't adopt out the terriers because the breeder had not yet signed away his rights to them. In July, when faced with a \$200,000 tab for the veterinary and other services the ASPCA had provided, Horton relinquished ownership. Throughout the intervening four months, the ASPCA placed many of the terriers in foster homes, explaining to foster families that



Virtually all of the adult terriers had to be shaved down to the skin. For many, this may have been the first time they were groomed.





Top: Although unsocialized, the dogs were easy to handle; bottom: these puppies were eventually adopted by their fosterers.



were interested that eventual adoption might be an option once legal hurdles were cleared.

The ASPCA did an outstanding job of hand-holding during the foster period, says Carol Cotton. "Many of us were falling in love with the dogs and thinking about leaving the country with them," she laughs. "It was hard to think we might lose Tallulah."

As soon as they could, the Cottons adopted Tallulah. They recall how at first she didn't know how to climb the stairs. Nor was she housetrained, although she learned fast. They were amazed that her footpads were like a new puppy's because she'd never been outdoors. For the first 24 hours in their home, she didn't utter a sound. When she eventually broke her silence, the gruff sultry bark earned her the name Tallulah, after Tallulah Bankhead, the screen star of the twenties and thirties.

"It's like having a new baby," says Cotton. "All she wants to do is play. She's also really attached to us. She always jumps into my husband's lap or cuddles up to Gracie, one of our other fox terriers. They look like a pair of croissants."

### Preparing for Adoption

Before the Cottons adopted her, Tallulah was simply dog #25. The ASPCA staff assigned a number and identifying collar to each terrier as he or she was brought out of the house in the Bronx. Over time, caretakers began naming the dogs. Animal care technician Emily Palmer, who was hired specifically to care for the terriers, chose Greco-Roman classics like Athena, Hera, Achilles—"fitting for such brave, heroic souls." She took a real shine to a dog she named Artemis after the goddess of the moon and hunting. "She was agile, smart and full of energy," says Palmer. "I had set up a ramp for agility training that most of the dogs feared. Not her. When she was adopted in August, I was sad. I still miss her, but there are pictures all over my office."

Palmer had the lion's share of the day-to-day care of the dogs. Just keeping the cages clean was a big job. "It was brutal at first," she says. "The dogs had always been caged so they had no choice but to relieve themselves in their cages. So when I finished cleaning all the cages, I'd just have to go back and clean them all over again." She recalls that after the dogs were being walked three times a day, they quickly became housetrained. One dog named Thumper (for the sound her happy tail made against the wall of the cage) went to the head of the class. "The first time Thumper was taken outside was the last time she soiled her cage—even if I got to her last, she'd wait to go outdoors."

As the terriers settled in, Dr. Pamela Reid, ASPCA vice president in charge of the Animal Behavior Center, prepared the dogs for adoption. All learned how to walk on a leash. Some were given obedience training. "We had a few young, mouthy ones who needed some work on basic manners," says Reid.

Elizabeth White, assistant director of animal placement, says there was great demand to adopt the dogs. Four families each adopted a pair of the terriers. "We came across a lot of people with good hearts," says White. Even Chanel—the deaf and blind 12-year-old with rear-end paralysis—was adopted, along with a custom-made canine wheelchair that was donat-

ed by a generous benefactor. A couple from Virginia traveled to New York City to adopt Chanel after seeing him on *Animal Precinct* several months after the rescue.

The last terrier to remain in the ASPCA's care was Foxy, also elderly and paralyzed in the rear legs. An ASPCA volunteer took Foxy home on a long-term foster arrangement, but in February 2004, officially adopted her. One dog, Barkley, nipped at a child in the first home where he was placed, and was eventually reassigned to an older, childless couple.

### Bittersweet Endings

Over time, the staff grew attached to the dogs. They were pleased to see them find new homes, but their absence left a void. "An adoptive couple who have a house upstate send me pictures of the dogs," says White. "It makes me happy to see them in the backyard enjoying the sunshine."



The terriers are brought together for socialization at the ASPCA Animal Behavior Center.



Steve Musso, ASPCA chief of operations, is nuzzled by one of the terriers. "Their sweet temperaments amazed everyone," he says.

The hardest moment for Palmer was when it became clear that Molly, the terrier with liver disease, would have to be euthanized. "She couldn't stand, she couldn't eat," she recalls. "It would have been cruel to prolong her life. So I held her in my arms so she would be with someone she trusted."

About six months after moving to Virginia, Chanel was diagnosed with cancer and was also euthanized. He had loved zipping around the streets in his wheeled cart. He did not die without ever going outdoors, however, or without knowing human care and kindness.

While life has now returned to business as usual at the ASPCA, the fox terrier rescue leaves those who were involved changed by the experience. Few will forget the shocking condition the terriers were found in. Staff and volunteers involved with their rescue and care became part of a mission that seemed larger than life for more than six months. The travesty with a happy ending not only changed the lives of 49 dogs, but also those of many humans who learned the rewards of teamwork and perseverance in a common cause.

For now, William Dunn, senior director and counsel for the ASPCA's Humane Law Enforcement department, is still hoping that this egregious case will go to trial. "Too often, people who are running a business don't think animals deserve humane treatment. They treat them like inanimate objects." And back in the Bronx, there are plans to raze the house where the wire fox terriers lived in shambles. A developer has bought the land and hopes to give the property a new lease on life.

In the end, the wire fox terrier story is not just about the rescue and rehabilitation of dogs. It is about the deep connection so many people feel toward our canine companions. "This is really about the interdependence of humans and canines," says Sandra Sebastian, manager of the mobile clinic program, ASPCA Cares. "Everybody here really rallied for the sake of the dogs, and when this tragedy was publicized, people responded to the suffering and came forward to help."

Tina Traster is a freelance writer in New York City.