

# THE GILROY DISPATCH

## Furry bundles of joy

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By Blair Tellers (btellers@gilroydispatch.com)



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Gift-wrapping a puppy or coaxing a kitten to stay put in a stocking has its own challenges.

Which is why paying a visit to the local animal shelter on Christmas day may be the way to go, especially if a fuzzy new best friend is on the family's wish list.

For the first time since it opened in the early '70s, the Santa Clara County Animal Shelter will open its doors to the public Christmas Day from 12 to 5 p.m.

Anyone who adopts a furry ball of joy can receive the package deal, including a special pet goody bag filled with blankets, chew toys and treats.

Adoption fees (ranging from \$90 to \$120) also cover de-fleaing, deworming, micro-chipping, vaccines and spaying/neutering, so there's no worry of surprise furry balls of joy down the road.

"Shelters in other parts of the country said having events on holidays can be very successful," said Brigid Wasson, animal shelter supervisor.

It's a feel-good, memorable activity for the family, she said.

That, and the odds of an orphan animal hitching a ride out of the shelter and into a new home are predictably favorable on a day where giving is the main event.

Wasson is taking cues from shelter personnel who say it's a good day to find homes for pets. Her friend Joelle Warren at Brother Wolf Animal Rescue in Asheville, NC said Christmas Day has tallied up to 15 adoptions.



Tasha Standridge holds her 4-year-old cat Chloe as her 5-year-old cat Checkers relaxes on a play structure at her San Martin home. Standridge adopted Chloe from the San Martin Animal Shelter two years ago. She adopted Checkers, also originally from a shelter, after her neighbors moved.  
Photo by: Lora Schraft, Staff Photographer



Volunteer dog walker Cynthia Hiatt gets a kiss from Vinny, a 6-month-old Jack Russel terrier mix. Hiatt has been volunteering for the past two and a half years.  
Photo by: Lora Schraft, Staff Photographer



"She also said their research shows that pets adopted as gifts during Christmas are actually less likely to be returned, as there is an emotional attachment to the event and the friend or family member who gave the gift," said Wasson.

Selecting a pet from the local shelter versus buying from a breeder or a pet store has a cornucopia of benefits, according to Wasson.

She said shelter staff and volunteers, all who have willingly signed up to work a few hours on Christmas day, spend quality time with the strays and can offer insight to each animal's personality.

"Specifically at this shelter, there's a really strong volunteer network. I enjoy talking to potential adopters about cats I've gotten to know," said Tasha Standridge, who's volunteered on and off for the last three years. "I think that's a really nice touch from the shelter."

Standridge even found her own pet, Checkers, a "tuxedo" black-and-white cat she fell in love with.

Potential adopters with a specific lifestyle are in good hands, and will be aided as they hone in on the best-matched canine, feline or equine companion (the San Martin location is the only shelter in Santa Clara County that handles horses and other livestock animals).

"We find out what type of animal they're looking for," said Wasson while giving a tour of the cat room.

Paws poked out of cages here and there, playfully swatting "hi!" at passersby.

"We steer them in the right direction, so they won't be disappointed," she assured.

A fun way to introduce the surprise, she suggested, could involve giving a toy cat or dog to symbolize the gift, with a note saying something to the effect, "Let's pick out a new pet today."

Savvy spenders will also appreciate the benefits of shelter adopting, which offers up to \$500 in services at rock-bottom rates, said Wasson.

Giving a stray a home, she adds, is just a good thing to do, too.

"People get upset at breeders for over-producing," said Wasson. "But as long as there's a demand, there will be a supply. People need to stop buying these dogs from newspapers, breeders and Craigslist. As long as people stop buying, they'll stop breeding them."

Sure, some of the shelter's tenants are a little motley, like Tink, a "sweet and playful" black cat with a missing eye. Or Lilly, a 20-year-old mare who can't be ridden, has a feisty attitude and a bowed knee that sticks out.

A number of occupants who arrive on a weekly basis are of "garden variety," as Wasson puts it, such the quizzical-looking Labrador-retriever mix, which actually looks like a Labrador/daschund hybrid.

But they've all got one thing in common: They need a home, and they'll love whichever person or family can provide one.

"The reason they brought him back says, 'Not Social,' said volunteer Kathi Farmer. She set Bangor, a 15- to 20-pound Maine Coon cat with the face of a lion and thick, curly hair on his underbelly, down on a cupboard next to a watering can.

The happy feline rolled over on his side and contentedly stuck a paw in the air.

Farmer looked up with an expression of disbelief, then glanced affectionately back at Bangor.

"How could they say that?"

For anyone with a cat stigma but warming up to the idea of a compact-sized pet that fits nicely indoors, the shelter is especially stocked with miniature breeds right now (Wasson said there will also be puppies coming in from a foster home Christmas day).

"A lot of them are just strays, and most of them are relatively healthy," said Wasson. "Little dogs are just hard to contain. They go wherever they want and end up getting picked up."

The area that houses the canines is a long corridor just beyond the cat room where glassy eyes stare questioningly at visitors through chain-link fencing.

Each kennel sports a decorative checkered bow, with a pithy description of personality jotted on an identification card hanging from the cage.

"Very friendly little guy."

"Friendly, sweet, high-energy girl."

When approached, a small terrier with a shaggy coat got off her bed, walked up to the fence and stuck her pink tongue through an opening for a "hello" lick.

Standridge points out a number of the animals are turned in by families, and are familiar with the living-at-home lifestyle.

"The animals are really grateful when they get the attention," she said.

Outside, Wasson pointed out a mare that came from East Gilroy.

"People are just abandoning horses when they're old, ill and having problems."

She stood in front of a 12-year-old bay colored mare long enough for the horse to lower its head into her hands.

"It's amazing," said Wasson, stroking its forehead. "People will drive out somewhere with a trailer and just let them go."

Standridge hopes the shelter will get a decent turnout Christmas Day. Nothing else is really open, she reasons. Why not?

"After the presents have been opened and what not, I think people will be attracted to going to look at pets," she said. "There will be down time to really think about bringing a pet into the family."

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