

# THE GILROY DISPATCH

## Kitty Christmas

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By Sara Suddes (ssuddes@gilroydispatch.com)

Even though they lost their little brother or sister to the night's freezing temperatures, three kittens that were abandoned outside the San Martin Animal Shelter last week will find a loving home, thanks to a guardian angel.

As part of the San Martin Animal Shelter's pet fostering program, shelter volunteer and Gilroy resident Shawna Murphy, 29, took the 2-month-old kittens under her wing and will nurture them through the holiday season. A staff member found the three tiny kittens - which have since been named Cleopatra, Piper and Marilyn Monroe - in a box that had been taped shut. The fourth kitten had frozen to death during last week's cold snap.

Over the next few weeks, the goal is to get the kittens healthy enough to adopt out to a permanent home.

"It's very hard not to fall in love with them," Murphy said.

Kittens, dogs, even goats, chickens and rabbits - the shelter acts as a temporarily home for hundreds of domesticated pets each year. This year, the shelter took in 240 dogs and 131 cats that had been surrendered by their owners - primarily because of job loss, home loss or both - and an additional 1,462 strays. However, the shelter only has space for a few dozen animals, so it relies on fostering and volunteers to operate adoption campaigns to ease the load and find animals good homes.

Laurie Frazer, a local dog trainer and the founder of Bow Wow Adoptions in San Martin, is working with the shelter to get as many dogs as possible in homes before Christmas. Her secret: She tempts families picking out a tree at Battaglia Ranch Christmas Tree Farm with puppies, she said.

"It's the perfect thing to go to a Christmas tree farm and ambush them," Frazer said.

In less than two weeks, Frazer adopted out 20 dogs at the farm.

"That's unheard of," she said.

All but one of the families left their home that day and didn't expect to come home with a puppy, she said.

This success is a delight to the San Martin shelter, one of a few shelters that allow people to adopt pets as gifts. However, the shelter encourages gift-givers to present their loved one with a photo of the pet or a gift card on the actual holiday, instead of wrapping up a puppy the recipient might not be prepared to care for immediately.

"We try to be pretty certain that that's what the recipient wants," shelter Supervisor Brigid Wasson said. Adopters can return their pet before 30 days if the living situation is not working out but they can only get their money back if they return the animal within 10 days of adoption.

If adopters are determined to give the pet as a gift on Christmas Day, Wasson recommended they consider the recipient's living situation and experience with animals before making that decision.



Three 2-month-old kittens, Marilyn Monroe, Piper and Cleopatra, eat at a foster home in San Martin Wednesday. The kittens were abandoned at the San Martin Animal Shelter and were too small to be adopted.

Photo by: Lora Schraft, Staff Photographer



Shawna Murphy, right, holds Piper and Marilyn Monroe as her mom Nancy holds Cleopatra in their living room.

Photo by: Lora Schraft, Staff Photographer

"If you restrict people, they're just going to lie and say it's for them," Wasson said. "But if you allow them to be honest, we can do a better job of counseling them."

The shelter gets about two returns per month but it's usually for a legitimate reason, such as an allergies or fighting with a pet already in the home, Wasson said.

Hollister resident Shelley Clark knows not to pick out a pet as a gift without the new owner present. Years ago, she adopted a dog from a shelter as a gift for her father-in-law. Unfortunately, the dog had been abused by a male and was scared of men.

"She had to go back," Clark said. "I just felt so bad. Sometimes it's hard to get a good fit as a gift."

Nonetheless, Clark has done more than her share of helping out the shelter this season. Wednesday afternoon, Clark adopted Tippy, her fourth cat in two weeks, from the shelter after reading about the shelter's overcrowding on a flyer in Hollister.

"I heard there was a need. It wasn't because I needed four more cats," she laughed.

About a dozen pets, including her new feline additions and a few dogs and horses, roam Clark's five acres in Hollister. Taking in animals is just her way of giving back, she said.

"I'm just trying to do my part," she said.

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