A DAY ON THE TRUCK
By Connie Toverud, May 2002, The Chapel Hill Herald

Would you apply for a position that had the following job description?

Applicants for this job must be prepared to:
… deal with a public that is often hostile, ungrateful, or is not interested in what you do
… listen every day to the same stories, same excuses, or sometimes the same lies
… have so much paperwork that you are often behind
… show up in court, sometimes once a week, to testify in cases that occasionally get thrown out
… have constant exposure to trauma, cruelty, injury, neglect or torture
… ride all day in a truck, usually alone
… sometimes have to be responsible for killing what you love

Sound like something anyone would want? Well, we can be grateful that there are men and women called Animal Control Officers who are willing to dedicate their professional lives to the service of animals and the protection of the public.

Very often they hear, "Oh, I couldn't do your job. I love animals too much." Well, it is because they do love animals, and care about people, that they take a highly-skilled, often lonely, job to help them.

Recently I had the privilege of spending a day patrolling with Orange County Animal Control Officer Gary Morrison in his field service truck. It was an educational day, with a very fine man. I asked Gary how he viewed his job. He replied, "I see myself as a public servant. My job is to educate, not to prosecute. The people of this county pay my salary with their taxes, and I want to give them the best possible service."

Well, I'm sure he does. I inquired about the education component of his work and he told me he gives talks in elementary and middle schools on keeping animals safe and well-cared for. He also works with individuals. When he gets a complaint about someone neglecting a dog, for example, he will make a call to the home to assess the situation. He may find the problem is ignorance, not neglect. People often do not understand that a dog must have shelter and fresh water (in a bowl that won't tip over), a place to move about, and proper food. If poverty is part of the issue, he will try to get a donated doghouse and dog food, and teach them how to care for the dog. 90% of the time, Gary says, folks like these love their animals and he sees they have followed his instructions when he returns to check. Does this sound like the nasty "dog catcher" portrayed in the movies?

After a day on the road with Gary, I saw he "walked the talk" of helping both people and animals. But I also saw the constant frustration that builds up as some people ignore his assistance, ignore the safety warnings, ignore the citations, and continue to neglect, abuse, or torture their animals. My day in the truck started with Gary checking the humane traps he had set out for feral (wild) cats. The traps are to capture sick, starving cats and take them to the Animal Protection Society shelter. These cats can only rarely be treated, neutered and placed for adoption. Most must be euthanized.

At the shelter we dropped off the cats and Gary picked up complaint forms that had come in. There were three. Gary says he tries to go directly to the house of the person who filed the complaint to get more information, then to the home where the problem has been identified. There he will either talk with the people or leave a note on the door asking them to call him. He says the first warning is a "wake-up call." If they don't call him back, he feels they are not serious and the problem will continue and citations with fines will follow.

Our first stop was at the home of a lady who complained about neighbors' dogs running loose on her property. We went to the two neighbors' homes and found dogs loose on their own property (lawful) and no one at home. Gary called his office to check if the dogs had rabies vaccinations and were licensed, and then hung notes on the door for the people to call him. The next call was a cruelty investigation. A vet had reported a dog brought in with a broken leg and a suspicion that there were other dogs at the home that were possibly being mistreated. When we arrived to investigate, we found a house that looked great from the front, with a nice dog house, and behind the house were four dogs staked down with short chains, no shelter, no water, malnourished, and one dog with a long coat so matted it would have taken a chainsaw to cut it off. No one answered the door, so Gary called for a backup ACO to bring a camera and serve as a witness. The ACO arrived and the scene was documented. It made me sick and angry to see those animals, and I realized this happened all the time for Gary.

After that it was back to the Hillsborough office to file reports and then off to see if a guilty party had followed up on a "vicious dog" confinement order. The dog was outside the pen in which he had been ordered confined, with no lock on the pen. There was a Beware of Dog sign. Gary had been trying to get the individual to comply with the order for 3 weeks! Another citation would be forthcoming. We drove to another problem home, this time a trailer. A dog was tied in front with an electric cord around its neck, no house, boiling sun. The individual had been reported last week for not having shelter and the dog running loose. Gary said he had been to the home before and there was a different excuse every time. This time it earned a $150 citation. Gary drove me past a house with 6 pit bull puppies in the front yard with heavy chains as leashes to build their upper body strength for fighting. I asked if all pit bulls were used for fighting and Gary said no, they were sometimes just regular pets and sometimes used as protection for homes where drugs were sold. He said the ACOs work with the police in identifying such operations. Gary drove me by a house where there had been a case of severe animal abuse and upon investigation it appeared that the children in the home were also being abused. In such cases the Dept. of Social Services is notified. Gary said it is so hard to take animals away from abused children, when the animals may provide the only love the children have. Of course the child abuse will be followed up. There were more stops, more checking, sometimes with positive results and often with none. Gary told me that this was really a quiet day. "You should ride with me in May when we get so many calls for snakes, bats, baby birds, squirrels and other forms of wildlife. And sacks of kittens abandoned everywhere." I plan to do that.

It was a great honor to spend a day with such a dedicated ACO, to see the level of professionalism and dedication. I would like to close this column with a heartfelt expression of gratitude to these men and women who spend long days in the truck, serving the animals and the public. Thank you!

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