

Santa Maria shelter dogs part of Oklahoma rescue

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By CATHERINE SHEN, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Two former Santa Maria shelter dogs, Elvis and Royce, are now part of the search and rescue efforts in Moore, Oklahoma, following one of the worst tornadoes in history last week.

“It makes us really proud to be part of the process,” said Stacy Silva, community outreach coordinator of Santa Barbara County Animal Services.

“This is a great showing of our community,” Ms. Silva said. “A little piece of us is out there doing a huge job in Oklahoma, so I think we are very proud to have been a small part of their journey.” The two Labradors were picked up by the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Ojai. Retired teacher Wilma Melville founded the organization in 1996 after

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“She realized America only had a few handfuls of canine teams during that time, and it took a long time to train these dogs,” said Janet Reineck, the foundation’s development and media director.

The foundation recruits dogs that are rescued from abuse or abandonment. They receive six months of professional training before being teamed with a handler. If a dog is accepted by the foundation but does not complete the training program, it is placed in a Lifetime Care home.

It costs the foundation about \$10,000 to \$15,000 to recruit, care for and train each dog, according to the foundation.



Rescuers use a K-9 to search for survivors in Moore, OK after a devastating tornado

PHOTO: BONNIE VCULEK



Royce, above, and Elvis, below, Labradors recruited from a Santa Maria shelter, train as rescue dogs

PHOTOS: (ROYCE) SHARON HANZELKA, (ELVIS) JENNIFER TAPP



The dogs are provided at no cost to fire departments and other disaster response agencies.

Typical characteristics of a rescued dog include an intense drive to play and over-the-top energy, said Ms. Silva. Those were the main reasons both Elvis and Royce were surrendered to the shelter in 2008 and 2010, respectively.

As Labradors, that “go-go-go” energy is typical, said Ms. Silva.

“They both had intense toy drive, which means if they have a tennis ball, that is all they care about. When we have dogs like that, we reach out to the foundation and ask them to come do a basic assessment to determine if they might be successful candidates.”

Elvis was the first shelter dog from Santa Maria to complete the training. Described as an “accomplished escape artist,” he was notorious in his previous family’s neighborhood, according to the foundation.

He arrived at the shelter and quickly impressed the staff with his boundless energy and ball-obsession.

Royce, who followed in Elvis’ paw-prints, repeatedly scaled his original owners’ 6-foot-tall backyard fence. His escapades were finally too much for the family to handle so they signed him over to the shelter.

Ms. Silva said the day Royce arrived, a foundation recruiter just happened to be at the shelter and immediately wanted to evaluate him.

“Our shelters are always looking out for good candidates and partner with the local and state levels,” said Ms. Silva. “It was just Royce’s lucky day that day.”

Both dogs are now part of search teams based in Oklahoma.

Search dogs are the best way to find people trapped alive in disasters, Ms. Reineck said.

It’s a game for the dogs as they are looking for someone to play tug with, not for disaster victims.

“These dogs are on their own, off their leash, scampering and running over the rubble,” Ms. Reineck said. The dogs must be focused.

“They are ignoring so many other things around them,” she said. “People, noise, sirens and any kind of little injuries. The moment they get distracted, it is over.”

Victim loyalty also is important. “If they are far from their handler and they get a scent, they do barking

alerts,” said Ms. Reineck. “They have to keep barking until someone comes, that victim loyalty to stay in one place is very critical.”

The foundation has 71 active search teams and is the only nonprofit organization that partners rescued dogs with firefighters and first responders. The teams are all trained locally, which is something the community should be proud of, said Ms. Reineck. “We are providing an important resource to the country.”

Santa Barbara County has two K-9 teams ready 24/7. Teams have been sent out nationally and internationally, including Japan’s tsunami disaster in 2011 and the devastating Haiti earthquake in 2010.

“It is the human and canine bond at its most poignant,” said Ms. Reineck. “Just having a dog there brings a sense of comfort in a disaster. When everyone is freaking out and in despair, to see a dog wagging its tail who just wants to play ball with you, for everyone, the positive impact is huge.”

For more information, please visit www.searchdogfoundation.org.