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November 6, 2012

Woman finds new homes for greyhounds

Finger Lakes Adopt a Grey takes in the dogs for adoption after their racing careers end



Mark Ferdinand/contributing photographer

Ro Narbe, director of Finger Lakes Adopt a Grey, sits with two of her greyhounds Saturday at the Cortland Free Library. Her group finds new owners for the dogs after they are done racing.

By MARK FERDINAND
Staff Reporter
mferdinand@cortlandstandard.net

When a greyhound outlives its usefulness as a racing dog, in many cases it will be put down, shot or left to waste away in a kennel, often after just two years of life. Greyhounds are eligible to race after 1 1/2 years of age, and typically retire at around 6, according to Ro Narbe, director of Finger Lakes Adopt a Grey. Her group, and others like it, provide a more humane alternative to racetracks.

She started the organization four years ago.

It is nationally sponsored by the advocacy group Grey2K, which seeks to ban dog racing. Finger Lakes Adopt a Grey is a New York affiliate of the Philadelphia-based National Greyhounds Adoption Program, which she said adopts out hundreds of dogs per year. Narbe said her program adopts out about 24 greyhounds per year.

The group adopts to a wide region of New York, including Auburn and Rochester, but none have yet come out of Cortland County, which is why she was at the Cortland Free Library on Saturday to bring awareness to the problem and her solution.

Adopting a greyhound through her agency is not as simple as filling out a registration on a website, she said. There is an extensive application process.

“We want to fit the right greyhound to your family and lifestyle,” she said.

A younger dog would fit best with a young family that might like to jog or power walk, she said, and an older, more laid back greyhound would be paired with someone in his or her 60s. Her group asks for references from veterinarians, and wants to make sure an applying owner knows what he or she is getting into.

Greyhounds have low body fat and thin skin, and so cannot be exposed long to the cold. It is also dangerous to the dogs to have them chained or leashed.

Greyhounds can run nearly 40 miles per hour, and having them tethered can result in a broken neck, she said.

Her dogs come from NGAP’s state-of-the-art national kennel, she said, with two full-time vets on staff.

“I want to die and come back as a greyhound and live at NGAP,” she said with a laugh.

Narbe lives in Newfield with her husband and five greyhounds, Tessa, Dulcie, Pippin, Izzy and Sally. She is a 66-year-old retired music teacher from New Jersey, who said she was inspired to enlist in helping retired race hounds about 15 years ago.

Her husband ran a shop that sold T-shirts and other items adorned with pictures of animals. One day, a couple of women came in asking if the store sold anything on which there were greyhounds pictured.

They had a conversation that ended with Narbe being invited to a picnic where greyhound owners were convening. She brought her small terrier dog, which was surrounded by a sea of larger greyhounds. Narbe was enamored then with how well-mannered they were.

“There had to have been 500 greyhounds there and the only one barking was our little terrier,” she said.

Narbe said many assume that greyhounds, because of their prior stressful racing life styles, are high-wired and difficult to manage, but in truth they are quite lazy.

“They’re the biggest couch potatoes you’ll ever see,” she said. “They’ll take a sprint around the yard in the morning and then they’ll go and find a soft couch.”

Greyhounds, she said, are well-tempered, intelligent and very sweet, despite their often abusive upbringing.

Narbe said they are also easy to house break because of their regimented schedules at the kennels at the tracks, and mostly get along well with

smaller pets like cats.

Racing is very dangerous to the dogs, she said. They can be electrocuted by making contact with the electric rail next to the track; they often break legs or ribs in collisions with other dogs, and can experience severe gashes or internal bleeding, she said. The only medical attention required by law to be administered to racing hounds is a rabies shot, she said.

While Narbe said there are great track owners around the country who do adopt out the dogs after they can no longer race from age or injury, there are also many who will simply leave them to die.

In Arizona, she said, greyhound carcasses can often be found in the desert, their ears removed by negligent owners. This prevents them from being traced back to the owner, as it is a law that the dog's birth information and racing registration numbers be tattooed on its ears.

One of the biggest tracks in the country is the EBRO Greyhound Park and Poker Room, a racino in Florida which Narbe said has over 1,000 assigned racing dogs. There are 13 operating tracks in Florida alone, each equipped with a breeding farm, she said. With about 200 females each birthing two litters per year of 8 to 12 puppies, there are tens of thousands of race hounds in Florida, she said.

The EBRO track in particular has gained infamy with NGAP and other adoption programs because of ill-treatment and overbreeding, said Narbe.

She said 37 greyhounds were found left at the track there after a racing season in 2010, many of which starved to death or survived by eating the corpses of other dogs. One dog owner, Ronny Williams, faced over 30 counts of felony animal abuse from that incident, reports say. NGAP and Grey2K have been lobbying to push through legislation to ban the races in Florida altogether, said Narbe.

While 28 racetracks are still running, she said, commercial dog racing is illegal in 38 states, and five have no operating tracks but no state mandate preventing them. According to the Grey2K website, the group is fighting to enact legislation in Texas, Arizona, Alabama, Florida, Iowa, Arkansas and Florida.

Visit www.fingerlakesadoptagrey.org and scroll down for more information on adoption.

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