

HOMELESS IN PARADISE
May 3-9, 2019

PENINSULA PULCHRITUDE - Part 18



DID MONTEREY POLICE ANSWER A HOMELESS DOG’S PRAYER?

By Wanda Sue Parrott

TALKING to dogs isn’t unusual; most pet lovers do it.

If, however, a journalist tries to interview a creature, it’s a different story.

For example, Part 15 of this “Peninsula Pulchritude” series raised the question:

“If a homeless dog dies, will its human join it by crossing the Rainbow Bridge?”

The Clip Art photo of a bulldog resembled the actual animal I had in mind above this caption:

On April 5, 2019, at Scholze Park in Monterey, an elderly homeless woman’s old dog gazed sadly into my eyes with red-rimmed orbs that spoke apologetically like a dream whisperer: I am dying. I am trying to prolong my life for her but cannot keep sleeping on wet ground or wearing ragged tee shirts to warm my bones that ache with raw pain. I must go. I am sorry. . . and hope we can be together again soon. Until then, take care of her as she deserves to be respected, not abandoned.

Why Such An Impersonal Approach?

First, although I knew the identity of the dog's owner, I didn't have permission to name Tara Robinson or her companion, Shay, in the column, so I used a metaphoric image. Why?

As a member of the 4th Estate, also known as the "Press" and/or "fourth branch of American government," integrity binds me to report truth even if I can't prove it, and a dog's prayerful gaze wouldn't have served as evidence unless Shay actually died.

Fortunately, Shay has perked up and was very-much alive when this column was filed April 30.

Second, homeless women like Tara are vulnerable, and our responsibility as journalists is to protect those who could be harmed by something we write, which leads to another "fourth" known as the "4th Wall."

This is traditionally space between a performer and the audience, or a writer and the reader, in which recognition-without-connection transpires.

In short, the audience/reader is free to believe or reject that which the performer/writer sets forth.

Was I predicting that Tara's dog would die if shelter was not found to keep the creature from further suffering? Or was the dog speaking in universal language that bypasses logic and touches the heart?

The Good News Is Both Dog And Human Lived

Nineteen days after Shay transmitted the "I am dying" impression on the porch of Scholze Park Community Center, Monterey's senior center where I rehearse on Monday and Friday with the Tap Bananas dance troupe, City Manager Hans Uslar announced formation of a new Multi-Disciplinary Outreach Team (MDOT).

<https://monterey.org/City-Hall/Newsroom/Whats-New/Whats-New-Details/04172019-multi-disciplinary-outreach-team-mdot-joint-press-conference-1100-am-wednesday-april-24-2019> .

Monterey *Herald* reporter Tom Wright wrote on April 24 of the new co-partnership between the city and private agencies to help the homeless:

"...Monterey Police Chief Dave Hober explained the group evolved from previous attempts to address issues related to homelessness.

"Hober said the team's roots go back to 2014 when Assistant Police Chief Bill Clark brought in service providers in the area for a monthly meeting."

It has evolved into a formal program of working together every day with social service providers to address the homeless situation in Monterey.

The collaboration involves Monterey Police Department, City of Monterey. Monterey County District Attorney's Office, Monterey County Adult Protective Services, Montage Health/Community Health innovations, Monterey County Behavioral Health, and the local YWCA, which is how Tara Robinson and Shay ended up in the news as Monterey's first homeless-woman MDOT success story.

City Manager Uslar said the police department interacts with the city's homeless population more than any other part of the local government. "Our officers get to know the homeless on a first-name basis," he said. "They know their stories, they know their struggles and often, what is needed is help. But the police department alone lacks the services and skills to solve many of these problems."

The Bitter Taste Of A Lemon

About two years ago, Tara approached me in Scholze Community Center, her face beaming as I arrived for tap rehearsal.

"You should write my story, Wanda," she said, "and call it Rags to Riches."

“What is your story?”

“Someone gave me their Jaguar. We’re living in it.”

“How can you af...” I started to ask, but Tara said enthusiastically that she’d saved money, which a friend kept, and used it to register the car, get a few repairs and fill it up.

Before I could get the story written, Tara and Shay were back on the street.

Her shiny Jaguar turned out to be an old lemon and Tara, now destitute, disappointed, and defeated, withdrew.

Over the next year she shrank into the dark folds of the hood of her tan coat and aged, along with her dog. Did she return to sleeping under a restaurant on Cannery Row? I never found out.

The last time I talked with Tara was Wednesday, December 12, 2018 at the annual Christmas party at Scholze Community Center, at which the Tap Bananas performed. We sat across from each other at lunch while Shay waited outdoors in the damp cold, on the other side of the wall where we tap dancers posed for a glitzy holiday photo taken by Tarnowski.

Between December and April, I occasionally saw Tara and Shay through the rehearsal room window. The former healthcare worker was a bent grey silhouette who shuffled as if she would break.

Next contact was April 15 when Shay’s sad eyes begged that Tara be taken care of as she deserves to be respected, not abandoned.

Well, thanks to MDOT, Tara’s face is again beaming with hope and, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear Shay is smiling, too.

Were Shay’s doggie prayers answered?

They say that with love all things are possible. I believe it!

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Photo: Monterey Parks & Recreation Department’s Tap Bananas pose inside wall of Scholze Park Community Center on December 12, 2018, while formerly homeless Tara Robinson’s dog Shay shivers on the outside as she attends holiday luncheon. Tap Bananas will perform on Sat., May 11 at the annual City of Seaside Mother’s Day Luncheon at Oldemeyer Center. Photo by Garry Tarnowski

Photo: Monterey’s Multi-Disciplinary Outreach Team (MDOT) members pose with first homeless woman and her dog to be sheltered through the new program launched on April 24. (L to R) Sgt. Jake Pinkas and Officer Amy Groner, Monterey Police Dept.; Fawn Mackey, Adult Protective Services; Tara Robinson and her dog Shay; Samantha Ramirez and Maxwell Coover, Community Service Officer (CSO) Interns. Photo Courtesy of Monterey Police Department.

This column appears in the CURRENT ISSUE section of Cedar Street Times, Pacific Grove, California’s weekly hometown newspaper at www.cedarstreettimes.com.

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