

Gina Protocollo, the friend to animals

By DAVID ROSS

You could call Gina Protocollo the friend to anything furry, or for that matter scaly or feathery. The fact that she also runs a mobile pet grooming service is only incidental to that fact. "I guess you could say that I'm the voice of the dog," she says. "I will do whatever I can when I find a dog that needs care."

"I've always been a dog person, really an animal person," she says. "I've had pigs, birds, even an iguana."

Her cause is to encourage responsible pet ownership. This is something she promotes, this is something she lives.

In December 2013, Protocollo, who has operated K-9 Cleaners in Valley Center since 2004, came across a dog named Vito, an adorable Pitbull who didn't look all that adorable when she first saw him.

His owner had neglected him to the point where he was covered with Dimodex mange. The owner reached out and asked Protocollo to help. The dog was so afflicted by the mange that he could barely see, and that was his condition



The before picture for Vito, as he was about to undergo a year of specialized care to restore him to the point where a vet would look at him.



The after picture of Vito the Pitbull. "He doesn't look normal but at least he's healthy," says Gina Protocollo.

when he walked in front of Protocollo's mobile van. She told the owner, "I'm not leaving without the dog." She didn't.

"I took him. I treated him, with the help of a veterinarian technician. If we had taken him to a vet at first, they would have put him down," she recalls.

It took a year of treatments before anyone could touch Vito without their hand coming away with blood on it.

Protocollo and her vet assistant friend gave the dog, who was about six months old at the time, cold laser treatments to promote hair growth. She had to put medicine in his eyes constantly to fight the infection that threatened to make Vito permanently blind.



Eventually he progressed enough that she took Vito to Dr. William Hernandez, an Escondido veterinarian. He was able to treat Vito's mange with ivermectin.

Today when she shows up at the office of Dr. William Hernandez all she has to do is say "Hey, it's Gina with Vito," and the veterinarian will stop what he's doing and come out to greet the friendly pooch.

Dr. Hernandez and his daughter Alia Hernandez operates Parkway Pet Clinic in Escondido, which Protocollo has also partnered with for pet rescues and to provide low cost spay and neutering services to attempt to reduce the population of unwanted animals.

"I want to acknowledge them for their dedication in rescuing animals in need," she says.

What condition is Vito in today? "He doesn't look normal but at least he's healthy," says Protocollo. She still calls him "Stinky Boy," although he doesn't smell bad anymore.

Another rescue dog is a Chihuahua whom Protocollo met six years ago.

She also occasionally finds homes for dogs that need them. "If there is a need, I will do it," she says.

Gina Protocollo has five dogs and all of them are rescues. They include Vito the Pitbull, Peanut the Chihuahua, a Terrier mix, a Queensland Heeler and a Doberman.

She just acquired Button, a Maltese-Poodle, who needs a home; and recently found a forever home for Lily-Ann a Weimaraner.

The Business

It figures that a woman who cares this much about dogs also gives tender, loving care as a groomer.

Besides basic grooming, Protocollo offers therapeutic grooming, including massage, laser and Reiki treatments. She also does bath, brush, ears, nails, teeth—and grooming always includes a haircut.

She doesn't have "regular" hours and, although she doesn't like to work every day of the week, it is possible to make appointments for any of the seven days. "My schedule is flexible," she says. She does all the work herself, from a converted ambulance.

She often does fund-raising dog washing, and has raised funds for the American Cancer Society, Angel's Depot (a now defunct organization that used to provide elder care for veterans,) and for the Humane Society. "It breaks my heart to go down there and I see these dogs and I just want to take them home," she says.

A one-stop shop

Protocollo is also a resource for people who want answers to questions such as, "My dog is old. Where can I find special care for him?" "I'm sort of a one-stop shop for everything from the puppy years to the senior years. I can usually figure out what to do. People are customers first and clients forever and in some cases friends, as well."



Two rescue dogs: Vito the Pitbull and Button the Maltese-Poodle mix. Button needs a home for those who are interested.

Several years ago, she opened her house to Leela, who belonged to a homeless veteran named Mike Toretch. As Toretch describes it, "Almost two years ago, I fell on some hard times. I had to move into a Veteran's shelter because I was broke and unemployed." Dogs were not allowed at the shelter.

"Gina took my baby girl in and took care of her until I picked her up. The thing is, I only met Gina 10 minutes before she said she would take her in. Gina was a 'friend of a friend.' I can't begin to tell you how much it meant to me to have 'Leela' in a foster home instead of having to take her back to the Humane Society where I got her in 2004. I can't thank Gina

enough for opening that big heart of hers for my 'Leela.' This woman is just AMAZING."

"I always knew I would have to give Leela back, but that didn't mean I didn't give her all my love," says Protocollo.

Perry Morrow describes how Protocollo persuaded him to provide a forever home for a senior dog. "Gina called and ask if I wanted another dog. She sent me pictures so I asked her to bring KC by so I could meet her. Her owner had passed away and KC was 13 at the time. Of course, I took her. She escaped a few times as I only live a half mile from her old home. Gina came and helped me find her and bring her back. Now she's a happy dog and full of energy. Gina still comes and grooms her. KC is always excited when Gina come to see her. Thank you, Gina."

Bruce and Tamara Moravec describes how Protocollo groomed, "my parents' small dogs for many years. Gina's compassion and care really came through for our family when my mother passed away quickly at age 90. We needed to find a placement for my mother's very elderly Yorkshire terrier, Gidget. Gina found a foster placement for Gidget and followed up with Gidget's care. In fact, because the foster situation was not suitable, Gina took our little Gidget into her own home where she cared for her out of the goodness of her heart for the final weeks of Gidget's life."

They added, "Gina is also our go-to resource for all things related to the care of our animals. She is very active in the Valley Center community, as well, and we always love to see her truck on the road or in the Western Days parade. In sum, Gina is a wonderful person and we highly recommend K-9 Cleaners to all local families!"

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