



Homeless man cares for dogs others discarded

Rescuers trying to find homes for dog

Author: Christina Vazquez, Reporter, cvazquez@wplg.com

Published On: Dec 30 2013 06:45:20 PM EST Updated On: Dec 31 2013 03:16:32 PM EST



HIALEAH, Fla. -

Richard Couto of Animal Recover Mission and his investigators stumbled upon the caged dogs in Hialeah by chance.

They were in the area working on an undercover operation involving a suspected illegal slaughterhouse, reviewing their footage by a large scenic lake, when they heard barking. Behind some brush with a waterfront view was a plywood shack housing 13 caged dogs. Some of the cages were locked shut. Others were nailed shut.

Couto feared the worst. This is an area known to investigators for what he calls "animal sacrifice farms" and "dog fighting farms." He was reassured by the fact the dogs had water and appeared to be in good health and well fed.

Unsure if the dogs were being collected for nefarious purposes or hoarded by a homeless person, he called Hialeah police.

As officers were investigating -- just as Miami-Dade Animal Services arrived -- "Tony" rushed onto the scene. The homeless man with salt and pepper hair calls the makeshift pile of plywood on a long stretch of shrub on the banks of a Hialeah lake his home. Hold Local 10 he only puts the dogs in cages when he leaves to find work as a day laborer.

"I got food. I got everything here," said Tony. "When I was over there and I saw the police car, I felt relief. I was worried something had happened to them."

"Tony" said most were strays that he brought there because he worried they could be struck and killed by passing cars. His heart goes out for dogs he believes others have carelessly discarded but admits he was getting a bit overwhelmed.

"I am happy you're here," he told Local 10, because now the dogs will go to happy homes. His only condition is that they don't go to what he called "kill shelters."

Couto and his team plan to help Tony. They will provide food for the dogs he plans to keep and are reaching out to their network of rescue groups to care for the rest.

Of the 11 dogs "Tony" wants to keep at least 4 or 5. They roam free with him at night he said, and on the days he doesn't have work. They are his companions.

"What made you collect so many dogs?" asked Local 10's Christina Vazquez.

"Collect? No, I don't collect. I find them," said Tony. "People just throw them out there. They are over there in Hialeah and cars could run them over. They were going to be run by cars so I just brought them here because at least here they are safe."

Animal Services found the dogs to be well cared for and so did not take any of the dogs. He was issued a warning to vaccinate them.

Of the 13 dogs, the Animal Services worker on scene told Local 10 it would appear 4 were currently on their vaccinations. Those are believed to be Tony's "original" dogs before he began collecting strays.

"I think it is a sad situation, and to see someone who actually cares for these animals that's just not equipped to care for them properly is a sad situation," said Couto, reacting to the realization that it is a homeless man who collected dogs off the streets. "This is just not a proper environment for domestic animals."

It is unclear who the property owner is and if that person plans to remove Tony and his remaining dogs.