

Local resident lived #SaveThe21 movement every step of the way



By Mike Pickford

Emily Mallett has never really been one to simply sit by and watch as horrible things happen around her.

It was no surprise then to her close friends and immediate family when the local resident became so invested in the heartbreaking case centring on 31 dogs seized during a police bust on an alleged dog-fighting ring in Tilbury, Ont.

To most, hearing that such a brutal, inhumane operation had been brought to a close would be good news, a cause for celebration. However, once she learned of the breeds of dogs rescued during the raid, Ms. Mallett came to the realization that her fight had only just begun.

Introduced in Ontario back in 2005, Breed-Specific Legislation (BSL) currently outlaws three different breeds of dogs across the province ? Staffordshire bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers and American pit bull terriers. All of the 31 animals seized were identified as being in breach of BSL. Since they were placed in the care of the Ontario SPCA, most assumed these animals would be afforded a second chance at life in a place they weren't outlawed. They were wrong.

The raid occurred at a property in Chatham-Kent on Oct. 9, 2015. Just a couple of months later, in December, the OSPCA euthanized three of the animals in their care, citing medical reasons. In February 2016, it submitted a request to the courts to euthanize a further 21 of the 28 dogs still in their custody. In this request, the OSPCA claimed that seven of the animals could potentially be rehabilitated, condemning the other 21 as too far gone and not fit to be re-homed out of province.

It started with local protests. A small group of picketers, maybe 30 in total, voicing their opinions outside Chatham-Kent's OSPCA and courthouse.

Ms. Mallett was there from the very beginning. It was an issue that hit very close to home after she admitted to growing up with these supposed dangerous breeds in her home.

?My family had these targeted breeds for many, many years and we had nothing but loving experiences with these animals. I've since been involved in rescue work and have heard nothing but good things regarding these breeds and so, when I heard about the dog-fighting ring and heard that it involved these types of dogs and what the OSPCA had planned? It was one of those things where I couldn't just sit back and do nothing,? Ms. Mallett told the Citizen.

She added, ?To me, complacency is the same as condoning an action, so I had to get involved in any way I could.?

That small group of picketers grew on a near daily basis. By the time the summer of 2016 had rolled around, Emily says she'd participated in at least five protests.

Then, there was hope. Renowned across North America as one of the continent's top animal sanctuaries, Dog Tales, based in King City, got involved. Led by Rob Scheinberg, one of the organization's co-founders, the group vowed to do all it could to save the animals from certain death. After being hit with disappointment after disappointment trying to deal with the courts and OSPCA directly, Dog Tales launched what would go on to become a global phenomenon last January, one that the powers that be could not simply ignore.

The #SaveThe21 would become one of the top trending topics on Twitter, with thousands of people from across the globe, including celebrities such as Richard Branson, Enrique Iglesias and Natalie Imbruglia taking photos of themselves with their own pets in an

apparent show of support for the vulnerable animals.

"That forced the OSPCA to realize there is a lot of public scrutiny on this case, more so than I think they even realized," Ms. Mallett said. "That seemed to swing things a little bit, or at least temporarily halt what they were trying to do."

From that point there was a peculiar period of silence as, unknown to Ms. Mallett at the time, Dog Tales were quietly negotiated with the OSPCA.

Then, almost out of the blue, it was announced on July 25 that 18 of the 21 dogs — another three had died while in OSPCA custody — would be sent down to Florida for rehabilitation. Joining those 18 south of the border would be another 7 dogs seized at a separate raid and 11 puppies born under OSPCA care. In total, 36 dogs were deemed fit for rehabilitation.

The animals were separated into two groups, with one going to a place called Pit Sisters in Jacksonville, FL and another to a sanctuary called Dogs Playing for Life in northern Florida. Mr. Scheinberg, of Dog Tales, personally transported all the animals from Ontario to Florida himself in a bus specially designed for the trip. It took him three journeys over the course of a month back in August and Emily had the opportunity to join him and nine of the dogs on what was the third and final ride.

"That was an incredible experience. It was a very fitting end to what was a whirlwind, two-year period," Ms. Mallett said. She did her best to describe her feelings on arriving at the sanctuary in Florida. "My breath just left me as I stepped off the bus and saw all these dogs happy, running around. I get emotional just thinking about it. It's difficult putting into words just how profound that moment was, to know that they're safe, to know that nobody is going to hurt them, to know that they're finally getting what they deserve, which is a chance at a life and a chance to be loved."

The dogs will undergo six months of rehabilitation before being considered for rehousing. Speaking to the trainers at the facility down south, Emily says she's confident each and every one of the animals will eventually find a home they can call their own. Although this particular issue did have a happy ending, Emily says there are many more stories just like it that end in heartbreak. Because of BSL, many families are left in anguish as their pet is taken away from them, never to be seen again. This particularly hits home for Emily as she currently has pets people may think are targeted breeds, when in actual fact they're not.

"Unless you know the proper bloodlines of a dog, you cannot say with any certainty what is and what isn't a pit bull. Even the term pit bull is factually incorrect." Under Ontario law, many dogs get killed because someone believes the animal is illegal," Ms. Mallett says. "For people like me, my dogs are like my children, they're members of my family. I couldn't imagine losing a member of my family because somebody made a mistake regarding the type of breed. But it happens, and it happens a lot."

As such, Emily is trying to raise awareness about BSL — she assists with the operation of two separate Facebook groups (Ontario Pit Bull Co-op and UnitedPaws), where she shares stories and attempts to educate people about dog breeds in Ontario. Perhaps fittingly, October is National Pitbull Awareness month. There will be a rally against BSL in Toronto on Oct. 15, one that Ms. Mallett plans to attend.

"To me, BSL is a completely prejudicial system. It looks at animals it believes to be dangerous when, in actual fact, any dog could be considered dangerous. I believe strongly in nurture over nature, it's all about the kind of life you give these animals and the example you set," Emily said. "In my opinion, in this case the OSPCA absolutely failed the very animals they're sworn and mandated to protect. I'm just happy it's all over and relieved we were able to save as many animals as we did."