

On the Positive Side: Take steps to ensure your pet is found - like Bruno

By Dr. Judy Long

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Often this column deals with the unfortunates of the animal world - homeless, abandoned, starving or injured animals: no name, no home, no future. The focus of this week's story is one of the fortunate ones: a beloved pet with a forever home and the requisite fenced yard. Bruno went from being a privileged member of the Estrada family to being a kidnap victim, subjected to who knows what treatment.

Last week the Internet spread the horrific story of this 2-year-old German shepherd stolen from his yard near Elks Club, just in time for Christmas. Pets are stolen all the time in Las Cruces. Some, we know, are used as bait animals to train fighting dogs. Some are taken by kidnapers who hold them for ransom, contacting owners in search of a reward. Some will be sold as "purebred dogs" with no papers or proof of vaccination (much less proof of ownership). Others disappear forever, and we'll never know whether they are killed by cars or predators or just "adopted" by lonely people who covet someone else's pet.

What kind of person would deliberately inflict these losses?

Do they have any idea what terror animal owners feel when they try to imagine what their beloved pet is suffering? How do parents explain to their kids what happened to Bruno, without giving them nightmares?

How do you look for an animal that has been deliberately "disappeared?" Where do you start? What authorities investigate this kind of theft? (One community resource is HSSNM's Pet Helpline, which matches up many lost and found pets - 575-523-8020).

Is the missing animal being treated well or mistreated? What about the ones who need their daily medication? Is a dog with pancreatitis eating greasy scraps on the street? Or eating nothing at all?

Has your stolen animal learned to mistrust humans? Or is he still too trusting?

No more suspense: Bruno was recovered, and is safe with his family today.

Bruno is a lucky dog. He had several things going for him, besides a family. First, the family's security camera got a good picture of the car in which Bruno was carried away. This provided an excellent starting point for the attempt to identify the perpetrator. Second, the family immediately posted a stolen-dog notice story and a photograph on Craigslist. Locally, there was an immediate blitz of e-mail notices, sent to many animal lovers in Las Cruces. The family also posted fliers in the neighborhood. Third, the Sun-News carried the story on Christmas Day, and followed up.

All of these things put pressure on the perpetrator. The police had been notified. The public was alerted. The heat was on.

Parts of Bruno's story are still a mystery. Bruno turned up scavenging for food in Mesquite. It appears that when things got too hot, the kidnapper turned Bruno loose, to starve or be killed with other "strays" on the street. An alert citizen recognized Bruno eating from a trash container, and Bruno was willing to jump into the car. Meanwhile, the man's wife had encountered the dog-theft article online, and they put two and two together. When they contacted the Estradas, it was clear the dog was the missing Bruno. The owner appeared to claim him, and the story has a happy ending.

This happy ending has lessons for us all. First, a pet should be microchipped so it can be easily identified, no matter where it turns up. Second, a pet is safe in your yard only if no-one can get in. Gates should be locked, not just closed. Of course a fence needs to be high enough so it's not easy to climb, even with a locked gate.

Neighbors are a valuable resource when a pet is strayed or stolen. If they see your animal where it doesn't belong, or in suspicious company, they can give you an early warning.

Many people find it valuable to train the pet so it won't come to strangers or accept food from anyone but you.

Of course, the pet is safest indoors with you.

Whatever means you adopt to keep your pets safe, enjoy them in the new year!

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