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Were local animal rescue efforts in vain?

By Luci Weldon, The Warren Record

Local animal rescuers are keeping a close eye on a case in Hertford County in which two People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) representatives are accused of dumping the bodies of dead animals in a shopping center garbage bin.

Hertford County courthouse records indicate that employees of animal-rights group PETA, Andrew Benjamin Cook, 24, of Virginia Beach, Va., and Adria Joy Hinkle, 27, of Norfolk, Va., each were charged with over 30 felony counts of animal cruelty and nine misdemeanor counts of illegal disposal of dead animals after law enforcement officers in Ahoskie found 18 dead dogs and cats in a shopping center garbage bin and 13 dead animals in a van registered to PETA. Both Cook and Hinkle, who were working for PETA's Community Animal Project, were later charged with second degree trespassing as well.

In a prepared statement presented at a news conference soon after the arrests, PETA President Ingrid Newkirk indicated that any dumping of dead animals in garbage bins was in violation of PETA protocol and occurred without the knowledge of organization officials.

However, those recent arrests have left local animal rescuers with more questions than answers.

Ruth Brown of Macon recently said that in December 2003, while she was still working with Rainbow Rescue, a no-kill rescue organization in Roanoke Rapids, she conducted e-mail correspondence with an individual who described herself as being active in animal rescue and who used the Community Animal Project, run by PETA, to provide foster care for the rescued animals, indicating that she was familiar with the organization because she used to work there.

"I thought it was the answer from heaven," Brown said. "We just thought 'PETA is the godfather for animals.' (Brown's contact) said they networked up and down the East Coast. They would take our animals."

Brown said that she was told that local animals transferred to PETA would be prepared for potential adoption. As animals were given to PETA, Brown said she had contact with a representative of the Community Animal Project out of Norfolk, Va., where PETA is headquartered, as well as contact with Adria Hinkle.

"We asked them about the animals and they said they only had to put one to sleep because of congenital heart failure," Brown said. "We questioned them on several occasions. They reassured us the animals were adopted."

Brown said that Warren County animal rescuers had held fundraising events to be able to pay for spaying and

neutering and other needs related to the care of the animals transferred to PETA, all in the hopes that the animals could be adopted.

She recalls an occasion when her husband, Paul, transported animals to Roanoke Rapids, where Hinkle met him and picked up the animals.

Brown also remembers an incident that occurred around May or June 2004 when she and another rescuer were to deliver animals. Brown said that she became suspicious after her original contact arrived in a large truck which contained over 80 animals. When the animals were to be taken to Ahoskie, the other local animal rescuer acted on Brown's suspicions by traveling to Hertford County as well.

Brown recalls that the other local animal rescuer was not allowed inside a building in Ahoskie where the animals were taken. After lunch, when the animal rescuer went inside the facility, the building was empty, but the rescuer saw syringe caps and blood.

When Brown asked her contact about what had happened to the animals, she was told that cats may need to be sedated when transferred from crate to crate.

However, Brown said that she has not seen any records that would indicate where the animals were taken after being transferred to PETA.

"I was still suspicious," she said. "There was no paper trail that the animals even existed after (we gave them to PETA). We had talked people into giving animals to us. We would give them to PETA."

Brown said that PETA continued to reassure her that the animals from Warren County were adopted.

"They told us that they were adopting, fostering, vetting, protecting our animals," she said.

In the meantime, the relationship between local animal rescuers and the contact Brown had relied upon grew tense.

"Towards the end, it got ugly," Brown said. "We were horrified."

In June of 2004, several local animal rescuers decided to cut ties with PETA, Brown said, and a Rainbow Rescue representative said last week that her organization "will definitely not have anything to do with PETA."

After the ties with PETA were cut, Brown said she did not hear from her animal rescue contact until the PETA arrests were publicized last month. On June 18, she received a 1:20 a.m. e-mail "out of the blue" advising her not to give animals to Hinkle.

Brown still wonders what happened to some 1,000 animals from Warren County that she said were transferred to PETA.

"PETA, I want to know where are they?" she said. "The first time I went (to a PETA facility) and saw the place, I saw them (PETA representatives) loving and helping the animals."

PETA has been advised to limit communications to or work in North Carolina until the criminal case has been resolved, but a PETA representative stated to the newspaper that Warren County is not in the area that it serves regularly.

Cook and Hinkle are scheduled to make their next appearances in court in Hertford County on July 19.

"We had faith," Brown said. "This is PETA. They told us they were fostering, vetting, networking these animals. Isn't this deception? We believed in them."