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Psychic casts for clues to burned dog's torturer

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By ELISE YOUNG
STAFF WRITER

Renaissance the Rottweiler knows the person who hurt him.

The dog was tied in a yard, barking as usual, hungry and thirsty. At last, a heavysset man in shabby clothing appeared.

"There! Have your water!" said the man, pouring boiling liquid over the dog's hind end, searing his fur and skin.

Today, rescued and healing at Associated Humane Societies in Newark, Renaissance asks: "Should I not bark?"

All this is according to Colleen Nicholson, a professional animal communicator who says she telepathically bonds with abused and neglected animals as well as beloved household pets. With her help, the shelter - and the law-enforcing state chapter of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - is hoping to find and convict Renaissance's torturer.

"It comes to me in the form of mental pictures, thoughts, feelings," Nicholson said. "Sometimes I get words."

Far out, right? Hokum? Hooey? That's debatable. But proponents say that when all leads grow cold and a \$2,000 reward for information has no takers, they're no worse



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

▲ Newark authorities sought Colleen Nicholson's help in finding the person who burned Renaissance, above. Nicholson says a pet pig helped her discover her abilities.

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off putting their faith in someone who claims to gab with cats, dogs, horses, birds, iguanas, fish, rabbits - the whole barnyard and then some.

"She's been very accurate in the past," said Roseann Trezza, executive director of the shelter. "It's easier for her to find out from them what's wrong than for us to find out."

Nicholson says her first jolt came 14 years ago, when she started getting vibes from her newly adopted potbellied pig. She believes anyone can talk to animals once they learn to recognize subtle mental messages.

"They describe cancer, often, as eating away," she said. "I've had animals explain heart attacks and aneurysms as explosions. Stroke is a strange one. Usually with stroke the animal is very confused. You can't always get a train of thought."

For Associated Humane Societies, she said, she waives her \$30 fee. She has contacted the burned Rottweiler twice from her home office near Syracuse.

She says Renaissance described a yard and a small back porch with four or five white steps. Nicholson got the idea that he had been "a tied-up dog who had a barking problem" and that he barked because he needed to eat and drink.

"I believe a lady was hounding the guy to 'give the damn dog water,' " Nicholson wrote in her report. "He seems to have three-day stubble on his face."

The dog's abuser could face 18 months in jail and a \$7,500 fine, according to Terry Clark, deputy chief of the state SPCA. His investigators are focusing on the neighborhood around Vailsburg Park, where Renaissance was found in late February. Ninety-nine percent of the policing is old school: posting fliers and interviewing folks on the street.

And then there is Nicholson's input.

"She didn't give us an address, which would have been nice," he said. "To me, what she says isn't fact, not in investigations. But things she has said - with our animals at the zoo - quite a lot of it falls into line."

The zoo is Popcorn Park in Forked River, a refuge for former circus animals, abused pets and injured wildlife. Its director, John Bergmann, first got in touch with Nicholson in 2001 after the death of Sonny, the zoo's elephant.

Sonny - who alive never uttered a peep, although he was quite a snorer - turned out to be a chatterbox in the afterlife. Nicholson's account went on for pages, with Sonny describing a traumatic separation from his mother in Africa and a lifelong suspicion of humans.

"It sends chills down your spine," Bergmann said. "It makes you very emotional. She told you things that you yourself shared with Sonny. ... Then you start to realize: This could be a helpful tool."

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In a country where pet owners spend \$34.3 billion annually on their companions, it seems only natural that pet psychics have found a niche. They claim to address naughty behavior, counsel after the loss of an animal or human friend, solve medical mysteries and find lost animals.

Of course, their claims cannot be proved, and the American Veterinary Medical Association does not recognize animal psychics.

"There's not a shred of scientific evidence that any sort of psychic power is genuine person-to-person, much less animal-to-person," said Gary P. Posner, a Tampa physician and lecturer on the paranormal. "People want to believe in it so badly. They have money invested, they have emotion invested. They want it to be true."

Stephanie Shain, a spokeswoman for the Humane Society of the United States, said the group has no formal position on animal communicators. But informally, she said, the feeling is: Why not?

"There's certainly people out there who are dishonest and will tell you things to take your money," Shain said. "But we know a lot of people feel they have been able to help their pet in a way they couldn't without communicators."

Shain herself turned to a Pennsylvania pet psychic when veterinarians couldn't figure out why her cat was losing weight and licking himself raw. The communicator said "tiny bugs in the floor" were the problem. The cat tested positive for dust-mite allergies.

Nicholson's information hasn't led to any arrests in abuse cases. But Trezza said she won't be surprised if Renaissance's abuser is a bedraggled man living in an untidy house that lacks a driveway and a garage.

Renaissance, with third-degree burns, is being pumped full of painkillers and swabbed every hour with antibiotic ointment. What's left of his coat is dull, and his frame is scrawny. But he stands with a measure of grace and pride, as Rottweilers do, and he has the breed's kind eyes.



Trezza said his recovery will go on for three or four months, and then he likely will be put up for adoption.

In the meantime, Nicholson has some advice for life beyond Newark's streets: A new owner will give him love. He won't have to complain for food and water.

"I'm telling him it is a good policy to only bark when needed," she said.

E-mail: younge@northjersey.com

6665816

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