

second chances

A dedicated group of Cantabrians work hard to ensure not all dogs that wander are lost.

Words **Pattie Pegler** Photos **Danielle Colvin**

It's a freezing, grey winter morning at Dogwatch, the dog rescue centre tucked up a driveway off Dyers Rd in Bromley, but the weather doesn't seem to dampen the enthusiasm of the residents.

Wet noses, curious eyes and wagging tails congregate behind mesh gates. There's the odd yelper, but surprisingly little barking as we walk around. The dogs are all in their yards, where they get to spend time outdoors with plenty of room to play and socialise with a carefully chosen canine friend.

A tan staffy-cross looks up at us, ears askew, head attentively to one side.

"That's Rusty," centre manager Pam Howard says. "He would have been great for Avsec [Aviation Security Service], but he's got the wrong look."

Next door, we meet a white collie-cross from the Selwyn pound, then there's big old Elvis, a dark brindle mastiff-cross.

Pam knows all the dogs and their quirks, which is no small feat, considering she has seen thousands of them come and go. She started with Dogwatch as a volunteer

in 1984.

The organisation itself is practically a Christchurch institution, having been founded in 1982 by Estelle Win, Peggy Van Bree and John Sharpe. The aim was, and still is, to rescue dogs unclaimed after seven days at the pound and rehome them.

For the first 19 years, there were no kennels; just a network of foster homes where dogs could stay until permanent homes were found for them. And it was only seven years ago that Dogwatch took on any paid staff. Until that point, the operation was entirely run by volunteers.

Now, Pam lives on site and runs the centre with the help of two part-time assistants and a pool of 60 volunteers. There are eight kennels and a further six being built. Dogs are accepted from four pounds: Christchurch, Ashburton, Waimakariri and Selwyn. The pounds decide if they have a dog that's suitable for rehoming and give Dogwatch a call. Pam will collect the dog and bring it back to headquarters. It will be given worm and

flea treatments and kept in a kennel by itself until staff have been able to assess its character.

They also receive plenty of phone calls from members of the public who, for one reason or another, want to give up their dogs. Often, they have unwanted litters of puppies or sometimes a dog that has become an inconvenience.

"We can't take private dogs – they'd have to be a very, very special case," Pam says. Dogwatch simply can't cater for them – its space and budget are limited and the number of unwanted dogs seemingly infinite.

"The problem is constant ... I never feel we're making headway," Pam says. "And I do get very frustrated ... not with the dogs, but with people."

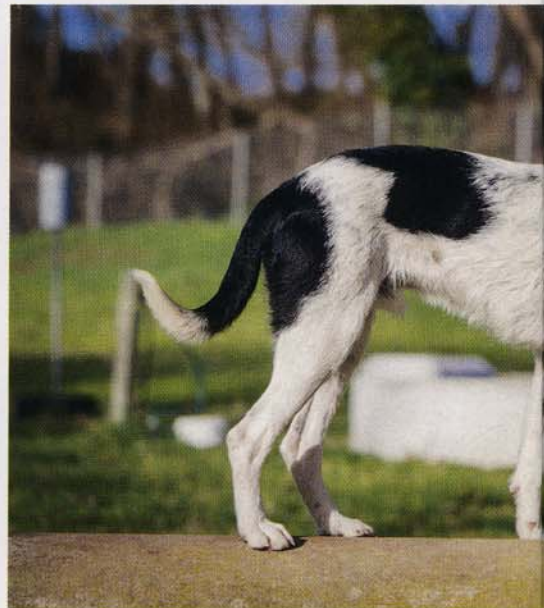
The daily routine sees dogs let out of their kennels and into their outdoor yards every morning. Kennels are cleaned and medications administered where necessary. Most dogs are paired up with a kennel mate, which not only keeps them company, but means more can be accommodated.



Pam Howard with Dingo, a seven-month-old bully-cross.



Volunteer Tim
Howard and Dingo.



They're fed and exercised, and every afternoon, the centre opens its doors to members of the public who want to adopt a pooch.

Ngaire Fyffe is one of Dogwatch's longest-standing volunteers, after nine years of service. She works a regular afternoon during the week and often sees members of the public come in and want to adopt.

"Sometimes, you come across people who don't like that the dogs are neutered and that's very disheartening. But the two main questions we get are 'how much does it cost?' and 'do you have any small dogs?'" she says. The answers are \$220 and very rarely. The majority of dogs at Dogwatch are good old bitsers – medium-sized to larger dogs, often with some staffy or bulldog breed in them.

Potential adopters are thoroughly vetted. They're required to complete

a form asking about everything from previous dog ownership to whether they own their home and their working hours.

"People can get a bit defensive about all the questions," Ngaire says, "but they're all relevant. We don't want to let a young dog go to a home where he's left alone for 10 hours a day and then starts chewing up the furniture."

Adopters are also required to be New Zealand residents. A few years ago, Dogwatch had a spate of people adopting dogs and then returning them when they were leaving the country. Pam recalls one man who came to the centre to drop off his dog before carrying on to the airport to fly home.

Those adopters who pass the initial criteria, then receive a home visit from Pam. Often people will state on the form that they have an enclosed yard with 1.8

metre-high fencing, but when she goes to visit, that might not be the case.

"It is time consuming," Pam says. "And years ago, we'd let the dog go and then do a follow-up visit a few weeks later, but it didn't work – dogs were escaping or being returned."

Now, although the homing requirements seem stringent, the return rate for adopted dogs is very low.

Last year, the centre rehomed 161 dogs and Dogwatch's Facebook page is full of happy photos of past residents in their new homes. In years gone by, the number has been closer to 200.

However, the housing issues in Christchurch have had an undeniable effect on the organisation. Some people are forced to give up their dogs because they simply can't find accommodation that will allow them to keep pets. And, of course, there are many people in temporary



Tessa, a young staffy-cross, and Obi.



Pam spending time with Obi.



Pam in the Dogwatch office with Turk, a four-month-old staffy-cross.

accommodation while repairs are undertaken, so they are not in a position to adopt.

But abandoned dogs often come from far more avoidable situations, where people simply haven't thought about the realities of having a pet that can live for a long time.

"It's often a case of ignorance, rather than nastiness ... it's a lack of knowledge about what's involved in owning a dog, financially, emotionally and time-wise," Ngaire says.

Els Desart, who trains dogs and their owners, echoes this sentiment. Els has been helping at Dogwatch since 2007 and, in that time, she's helped the centre adjust the way it manages the dogs. "When I first came to Dogwatch, there was lots of emphasis on the dogs getting as much exercise as possible and lots of free running ... but the dogs just get

fitter and fitter. What they needed was time to socialise with people, build up some positive human interaction, so now volunteers might spend more time playing or walking with the dogs, or just grooming them, and we have some dogs that are taken for walks in the community, so they get more exposed to different things."

Els also runs training sessions for new volunteers and monthly information sessions for people who have recently adopted dogs.

"The most common misconception that comes up at the new owner sessions is this idea that I have a new dog and I have to rush off to the dog park to let him play with other dogs. People have this idea that to make my dog happy it needs to see other dogs. That's not true at all," Els says.

Instead, she advises new owners to focus on giving the dogs time to settle into their new homes and bond with their

new families before rushing them into the world.

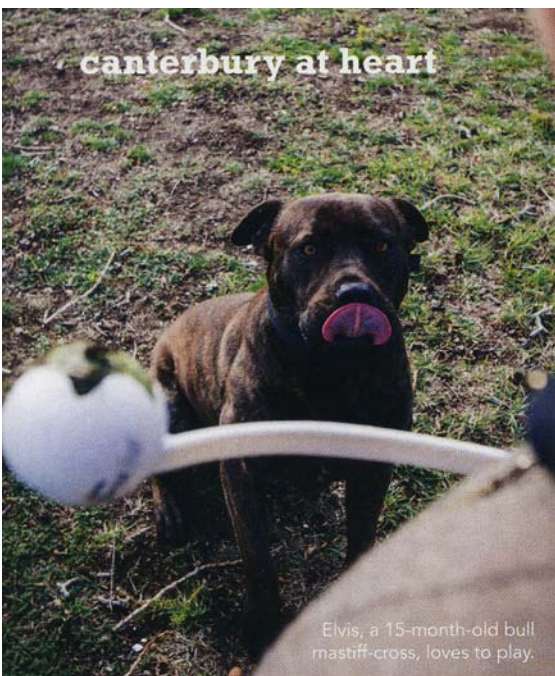
"People want to rush ... and we expect our dogs to keep up with human life, but get to know your dog first – you don't know what past experiences they've had or what they might find scary."

Els also objects to the prejudice sometimes expressed about some of the common crossbreeds found at Dogwatch. "I have lots of families who have staffies, and they're fantastic dogs," she says.

Aside from the dogs, one of the other constant struggles for the organisation is funding. Rescuing dogs, just like owning dogs, is costly. And, as well as all the day-to-day demands, centre manager Pam has to find the money to keep the operation going.

The centre is partly funded by Dogwatch's second-hand shop in New Brighton. Members of the team also go

canterbury at heart



Elvis, a 15-month-old bull mastiff-cross, loves to play.



Freya Russell on duty with Dingo.

to the Riccarton Market every Sunday in the summer to raise Dogwatch's profile and make money by selling doggy items – collars, leads, bedding and toys. They're also hoping to attract some corporate sponsorship.

Donations are also important, but they do fluctuate, as do the gifts of food and other supplies they receive. When *Avenues* visited, a pallet of food had been delivered from one of the big dog food manufacturers. It was a happy surprise, but the organisation had no idea it was coming.

It makes planning tough, so Pam takes a worst-case scenario approach. "My theory is always work on a zero balance, because you just don't know what will come in," she says.

Volunteers play a huge part in keeping the centre running. Costs are kept low so the money can be spent where it matters: on rescuing dogs. The gates to the six new kennels being built have been donated from the old police dog kennels. Pam's husband, Neil, who fortunately loves a project, is doing a lot of the work finishing off the sleeping quarters.

Unfortunately, the problems Dogwatch tackles are unlikely to go away. Unneutered pet dogs, a lack of awareness about what's involved in dog ownership and people who buy cute puppies, but don't like the full-grown animals, are all contributing factors.

"We'll always be the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, until there are serious changes in the regulations around dog ownership. A lot of it comes down to

irresponsible breeding. If you're not a registered breeder, then there should be some sort of compulsory desexing," Pam says.

The Dogwatch website lists many dogs for adoption. The kennels are full of faces looking out from behind mesh gates, albeit cheerful faces.

But, fortunately for Christchurch's thrown-away dogs, a huge amount of goodwill, free labour and generosity keeps Dogwatch thriving. Pam and her team can't afford to dwell on the negative. They have work to do.

As Ngaire says: "It can be disheartening ... but it is so overwhelmingly offset by the joy of seeing those dogs go to a good home. That's what you're there to do and it can be so rewarding." *A*