

FREE TO A GOOD HOME?

Animal welfare workers agree: advertising pets on a public forum without careful screening is hazardous.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY JENNI DAVIES



Gentle Golden Labrador Andy had a wonderful life in a comfortable, loving home. But when his owner Suzanne* was retrenched, Andy had to be rehomed. She advertised him on a leading South African classifieds website as “free to a good home” and found what she thought was the ideal home. Friendly, well-spoken Cheryl* promised that sweet-natured Andy would join her family on their smallholding, sleeping inside, eating the best food, and playing with her children.

Suzanne was utterly horrified to discover that Andy was, in fact, living in an informal settlement, tied up in front of a shack as a guard dog. Denay Saunders, director of Uitsig Animal Rescue Centre (UARC) near Cape Town, remembers, “It was a long, hard battle to get Andy back, involving the police and various animal welfare organisations. Like many a charlatan, Cheryl knew exactly what to tell Suzanne to get her to hand over her dog.”

RISKY BUSINESS

Animal welfare workers agree: advertising pets on a public forum without careful screening is hazardous. They could land up in unacceptable circumstances, neglected and heartbroken. At worst, your pet could be badly abused, or used as dog fight bait or a “breeding machine” in a puppy mill. Suzanne managed to get Andy back relatively unscathed, but not all animals are as fortunate.

The recent American case of “Puppy Doe” is an appalling cautionary tale. Puppy Doe, previously named Kiya, was rehomed for free via Craigslist (America’s “Gumtree.com”) without checks or follow-ups. Months later, she was discovered on a city pavement, so brutally tortured by the “adopter” that she had to be euthanised.

Animal welfare organisations say that this is only the tip of the animal abuse iceberg. Don’t take the chance. Invest care, time and effort so that you find the best home if you really cannot keep your dog; or have it adopted via one of the rescue organisations.

ADOPTER BEWARE

Saunders says that there’s a flipside – taking animals “sight unseen and no questions asked”. Many animals at her rescue centre are there as a direct result of this, including Rhodesian Ridgeback Bruno, originally from Durban, who was

advertised on the same classifieds website Suzanne used. Wanting a friend for their dog, a kind-hearted Capetonian couple offered him a home. Because they couldn’t meet him or his owners beforehand, the couple weren’t forewarned about his dominance issues (which his previous owners knew about) until it was too late and he had attacked their dog.

Don’t be put off adopting – it’s very rewarding and sorely needed by thousands of wonderful pets. The key is to do research: meet the dog first, and discuss your and its needs with the current owner or shelter staff. Ask a local rescue centre to assist with your adoption. Email network@barkingmad.co.za for help.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Sometimes, despite all your best efforts, pets need new homes. If local animal shelters are full and you have to rehome privately, time and using common sense are crucial.

- ▶ Don’t rush – hasty decisions have potentially horrendous consequences.
- ▶ Spay/neuter your pet before rehoming, especially pure-breds.
- ▶ If they have/had other pets, contact their vet for a reference.
- ▶ Do a home check. Spend time chatting, observing other pets, and getting a feel for the home.
- ▶ Meet on neutral ground and then take the animal to the potential home. If you have a high-theft breed, such as a Pit Bull type or Boerboel, never invite strangers to your home to meet them.
- ▶ Draw up an adoption contract; go online for examples or ask an animal welfare organisation.
- ▶ Have an adoption fee. Feel uncomfortable about “charging” money? Pay the fee to the adopter’s vet or into a special account for future treatment, vaccinations or sterilisation.
- ▶ Do at least two follow-up visits.
- ▶ Be honest about health or behavioural issues and, if they say they can’t cope, move on.
- ▶ Listen to your instincts. If you feel uneasy or people are cagey, say “no”. Real animal lovers should understand your need for caution. 🐾

*Names changed.