

boston uncommon

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DISPATCH

Emotional Rescue

Why so many abandoned and injured dogs plucked from the streets of Puerto Rico are finding homes in Boston.

By Twig Mowatt

When Zooeey, a 26-pound mystery mix, plays her favorite game of tossing toys in the air, the balls and stuffed animals reach such heights that owner Jane Myers regularly checks the top of the refrigerator for them. A human willing to do her retrieving is just one of the many perks Zooeey enjoys in her new Cambridge home. It's a long way from her early life when, as an abandoned mother of eight puppies, she searched for food on a beach in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and struggled to walk with a badly healed broken femur.

Zooeey is one of roughly 500 lucky "satos" (Puerto Rican slang for street dog, the word rhymes with "gato," or cat) that have arrived at Logan Airport in the past year in search of homes. This relocation effort is the result of the San Juan-based Save a Sato (SAS) Foundation, whose volunteers comb dumps, beaches, and housing projects, taking in every stray they can.

The rescued dogs get thorough checkups, vaccinations, and other medical care before heading off to local foster homes. When they're physically and emotionally ready, they're sent by plane to no-kill shelters in the States, including four in Massachusetts.

Myers first heard of SAS from a friend she spotted walking his sato through the Medford Fells. Having seen many animals in desperate conditions on her global travels,

Myers liked the idea of helping a stray dog, and her impulse drew her to the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem last June to adopt a sato. It was Zooeey's personality that clinched the deal. "Whatever she endured on the streets only seems to have made her more loving," Myers says. "She is the sweetest dog one could ever want."

These charismatic lowriders are gaining fans around the city. (Though they come in all ages, shapes, and sizes, the typical sato is small, weighing under 35 pounds, and a mix of everything from Chihuahua to shepherd.) Some dog lovers have become so familiar with these rescued animals that in certain dog-walking locales in Greater Boston, "sato" has become an acceptable answer to "What kind of dog is that?"

"Of all the animals we place, the satos have the strongest following," says Northeast Animal Shelter director Julie Potter. "People come in because they have one and want another or because their friends have satos. These dogs really get under your skin."

It hasn't always been that way. Early on, many people in the area feared the Puerto Rican dogs were depriving local strays of shelter space, says Potter. But that's not the case. New England's spay and neuter campaigns have been so successful that few puppies are available locally. For example, Leigh Grady, executive director of



GLORIA MARTI of the Save a Sato Foundation in Puerto Rico comforts a rescued dog. Many of the former strays end up in Massachusetts.

the Animal Shelter Inc. in Sterling, says that five years ago she would take in more than a dozen local litters annually, but last year she saw only a handful of local puppies. Her shelter offers sato puppies, as well as adults. Furthermore, satos satisfy a demand for small dogs, which are noticeably few in area shelters.

The benefits for satos and their new owners are mutual. Thousands of dogs struggle to survive on Puerto Rico's streets. Spaying and neutering are rare, for both financial and cultural reasons. There are some animal shelters in metropolitan San Juan, according to SAS, but locals aren't in the habit of going there to surrender a pet or adopt one. SAS has taken in satos that have been intentionally run

over, burned with hot water, set on fire, kicked, or pummeled. Among the satos currently being fostered in San Juan are Ladybug, whose jaws are badly misaligned, presumably the result of a kick to the mouth, and Evelio, whose left eye was dangling from its socket when she was found at an intersection.

The stories are gut-wrenching, but the endings are often happy. Joe Schick of Somerville adopted Sasha, a border collie mix, a year and a half ago. "She was housebroken from day one," he says, "eats whatever you put in front of her, and is very thankful to have a home." **BG**