

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Pet Lovers Jam For A Good Cause At Rainbow Beach

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Cynthia Graham **December 01, 2014**



In the first of what is expected to be an annual benefit to bring awareness and raise funds to combat the problem of animal abandonment on St. Croix, Animal Jam 2014 brought people and pooches together on the shores of Rainbow Beach on Saturday for a day of education, music, sun and fun.

Edmund Davys, president of Healing Paws Sanctuary, one of the five organizations that joined forces to put on the event, and also an organizing committee member for Animal Jam, said the idea was inspired by the popular Reef Jam event held in the spring, which helps to raise awareness to protect the island's reefs.

"We love Reef Jam as a fundraising fun day and we talked to Janelle Schindler who runs Reef Jam who helped us with the organizational part of it and that was great," Davys said.

Davys went on to explain the problem of animal abandonment on St. Croix, stating that about 4,000 animals are rescued each year by the St. Croix Animal Welfare Center, another of the organizations that participated in Animal Jam.

"Because we have such a beautiful climate, animals in the wild here basically don't have any problem surviving the winter so they just breed and breed and breed," he said. "And the St. Croix Animal Welfare Center, which has been handling this, pretty much by themselves for the last 42 years, has really been overwhelmed. They take in animals on a per capita rate about five times that of what a shelter in the states takes in. So they're really overwhelmed with demand. So we have a lot of animals that are suffering and much of the problem exists with cats and dogs, adopted locally."



Dogs awaiting adoption at the Animal Welfare

Center attend Animal Jam.

He called the problem a "complicated" one when trying to bring about public awareness and getting a spay-neuter program fully operational on the island.

"Mostly, it has to do with the fact that there's no natural selection. In the states, animals in the wild don't survive the winter, so they either find shelter, find somebody to care for them or they just die in the winter," he said. "Here, they don't; so that means they just keep producing, so we have a high volume. We need to do work on spay-neuter. If there's a problem with a dog, take it to someone who will take care of it; don't just let it go over the fence because it will end up creating 50 or a hundred more and then those will end up showing up as either roadkill or if somebody brings them into the shelter, then we have to try to find homes for them."

Davys further explained that Healing Paws, which is slated to open in 2015, is an expansion of the adoption arm of the Animal Welfare Center, adding that the two non-profit organizations have entered into a partnership made official by the signing of a memorandum of understanding on how they would work together.

"[Healing Paws] wants to expand on Pets from Paradise, so we're flying more animals to the states. We have a farm in Virginia that's being used as a gateway for us so animals could go all over the United States to be adopted," Davys explained. "We're also going to be saving animals that aren't normally saved in open-door shelters. We'll be saving animals who come in that are stray, but if they come in with heart worm or ring worm or something that's easily treatable, we're going to raise money to try to treat those animals, as well, and save them. So, it will give us more room, and more people, more volunteer effort to try to double the number of animals that we save."

Davys also pointed out that longstanding cultural activities continue to pose a problem to the welfare of animals on St. Croix.

"Cockfighting, things like that, are a part of the history here, and so that doesn't lead you to being sensitive to animals," he said. "So, a lot of it, we have to be very careful that we moved here, and try to encourage them to understand the and see if we can get them on board."



The Brian McCullough Band performs at Animal Jam at

Rainbow Beach.

While cockfighting is still legal in the U.S. Virgin Islands, it has been outlawed in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A law has also been passed that [outlaws cockfighting attendance](#).

Therese Donarski, director of the Virgin Islands Humane Learning Center, one of five organizations that partnered for Animal Jam, said her organization conducts anywhere from 350 to 500 lessons per year in local schools.

"We do pre-Kindergarten through high school and each grade has a different lesson that builds on the one previous, so we start with lessons about responsible pet ownership and the things that pets need to stay safe, healthy and happy," Donarski explained. "We talk about spay-neuter and safety around animals. so, we always bring an animal with us to the lesson and practice petting the animal and interacting with them safely."

Donarski also said animal abuse often results from people's past experiences.

"A lot of times why an animal might be abused is because somebody had a bad experience with them," she said, adding, "and we also connect animal cruelty and interpersonal violence. I used to work at the Women's Coalition before working with the animals. We have a puppet show about conflict resolution."

In her 11 years with the VI Humane Learning Center, Dornaski said she only desires to help the island's pet owners understand how to properly care for their animals.

"Basically, we're saying that these animals are our lives and we want to make sure that if people are going to adopt a pet or bring one into their life, that they're going to be responsible and make it a good experience."

The Sunshine Foundation, another organization participating in the Animal Jam collaborative effort, focuses on feral cat colonies.

"For \$25 they test cats for feline leukemia, if they test positive they do put them down, because it's highly contagious through blood or saliva," Donarski explained. "If they test negative, they vaccinate them, give them a worm out, spay-neuter them, and they do a little ear tip so that if they get caught in a trap again, they would know that they have already been spay or neutered."



A pooch having fun at Animal Jam at Rainbow Beach.

Jennifer Olah, owner of Cruzan Cowgirls, expressed the importance of the St. Croix community loving the island's animals.

"We need to be sharing that compassion, not only with each other, but with the little hairy creatures who are here with us," she said. "We see horses all the time on this island running around with their ribs poking out or tied to trees and left with no food or water, and that is not healthy for us as a community."

Cruzan Cowgirls rescues horses that are abandoned or abused.

"A lot of times, the owners have turned them over to us. We rehabilitate them. Give them medical treatment if they need it. We then retrain the ones that can be and we use them for riding tours, and the tours help pay for us to help more horses," Olah explained.

Currently, the rescue shelters 17 horses, two more than its allotted capacity, at its Estate Carlton facility and have adopted out six horses since it was established a little over a year ago.

In addition to rescuing horses, Olah said Cruzan Cowgirls makes house calls to local horse owners.



"We also go out into the community, if people need help with horses, say they own their horse but don't really know what to feed them or how to care for them if they have a wound, we try and help them with that," she said. "Or maybe they're a great owner but they just need a little help financially with maybe some wormer or shots, we can sometimes help cover those things."

When asked if horse adoptions are in great demand on St. Croix, Olah admitted that it is challenging to find her rehabilitated horses new homes.

"It's kind of difficult to find homes that have the financial resources, the space and the understanding of how to care for a horse," she said. "It's kind of a challenge to get them adopted out sometimes."

She added: "We turn horses away everyday that we just don't have the finances or the room to house yet. Our goal is to raise enough funds so that we could possibly lease or purchase a piece of property that we could be able to house more horses and also expand into more educational programs where kids could come and take lessons."

Besides conducting riding tours that help fund her operation, Olah said Cruzan Cowgirls also rely on financial donations from the community in order to stay afloat. With that, she praised the efforts of Animal Jam in bringing the organizations together.

"I think it's really important for our community to see all of these organizations working together because, I think, on island, we have a lot of people who feel like they're struggling alone, and we have a hard time as a community, I think, reaching out and saying, 'What if we all work together,'" she said. "This is kind of an example of five different organizations, that normally don't, and they've actually had history in the past

where they actually didn't like each other, but now, have said, 'You know what, what could we do if we worked together.

"I think it's really cool to see that happening and for our community to see that happening here. I'm really, really excited. I hope that we can set an example and that other and start really



Bay moved to St.

Croix six weeks ago and is enjoying the festivities at Animal Jam.

For more information, call Cruzan Cowgirls at (907) 841-1990; VI Humane Learning Center at (340) 690-5403; Healing Paws Sanctuary at (340) 513-8440; St. Croix Animal Welfare Center at 340-778-1650; and visit the Sunshine Foundation [here](#).