

?Underground Puppy Railroad? reaches Aurora



By Brock Weir

Teacher Scott Baker has always had a penchant for Canada's far north, so faced with a shortage of Ontario teaching jobs, his interest took him and his wife, Caroline Dionne, to a remote Labrador community where they found themselves doing far more than teaching local kids the three Rs.

Baker, an Aurora native, and Dionne, who hails from Ajax, have joined up with four other teachers at Labrador's Mushuau Innu Natuashish School to found what they have dubbed the ?Underground Puppy Railroad.?

The initiative collects wild and feral dogs that have overrun the community, often abandoned by their owners, and left to fend for themselves in the harsh environment. The abundance of abandoned dogs was recently the focus of scrutiny across the country when community leaders planned a cull to shoot the dogs to alleviate the problem but pressures from outside the community quickly halted the plan.

?It took what we normally do and just ramped it into high gear,? said Dionne, 26, of the plans for the cull. ?In the last week, we got 11 dogs out which was a huge feat for us because just getting flights coordinated is very time consuming and it takes a lot of help and a lot of people and a lot of cooperation. With the cull happening, we were really able to ramp it up, get some other people, and get some more dogs than we usually would be able to get out in a short period of time.?

One of the dogs making her way to a new home last week was Scoundrel, a two-year-old husky mix who has found a nice comfortable new home with Scott's father, local dentist Dr. Drew Baker. The very docile and affectionate dog got a good checkup at a local veterinary clinic on Friday, despite a questionable tooth ? but that shouldn't be a problem for too long in Dr. Baker's household.

Scott says he has always had a certain fascination with Canada's First Nations and this has extended to wanting to work in remote communities. While at teacher's college, he says he noticed there were few jobs available in the province so he expanded his horizons across the country, applying to countless reserves, with a particular focus on the north.

?When I got offered this job, it just sounded like a really good job and a really good opportunity and I accepted that, and I am glad I did,? he says. ?It is a fascinating place; challenging but fascinating.?

But what was also challenging was coming up with a solution to a situation which was staring them in the face day in and day out. Ms. Dionne says it was hard to ignore the issue of the huge amount of abandoned and feral dogs in the community when you see them around every corner.

?They are literally freezing to death if you don't take them in and are starving to death if you don't feed them,? she says. ?For us, personally, we can't walk by a dog and let it stay outside when we know its fate would be death. It is not something we necessarily sought out, it is just something we can't ignore when it is all around us.

?[We're working] with teachers who were up here last year and they started sending out dogs because they noticed there was the overpopulation here, especially puppies. It is really hard for them because there is no food and they're just left to their own devices.?

Their efforts got some of the dogs out to the SPCA in Goose Bay, and when Mr. Baker and Mr. Dionne came on board, they took things a step further and have not only arranged their own adoptions, but also their own foster care in their home until they can find the right destination ? either a shelter or, ideally, a loving home ? for them. And they have done so in Aurora, Ajax, Pickering, Labrador City, Halifax, Antigonish, and St. John's.

With the call for a cull, their house became a little bit more chaotic because they had more dogs in there than ever before, reaching 11 at their peak. Most are husky mixes, as one would expect in that part of the country, but there has also been a boxer and even a Chihuahua in the mix.

Their efforts, however, have not been met with unadulterated enthusiasm by their community, however.

?We have found most of the dogs ourselves, just wandering around, but recently we have had some members of the community seek us out, which we think is great,? says Ms. Dionne. ?That is a lot of progression in the town because they're very anti-what-we-do. They believe the dogs are their own issue and they want to be left to take care of them on their own [but] we see a lot of abuse within the Town.?

For more information on the ?Underground Puppy Railroad?, see the critters up for adoption, or make a contribution, visit undergroundpuppyrailroad.webs.com.