Getting pets a family affair

Impulse buying, especially at Christmas, can lead to lots of heartbreaking

By Corry Anderson-Fennell

BY CORRY ANDERSON-FENNE

SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

By the time he was nine
weeks old, an akita puppy
named Boots had already lived
in three places: The home
where he was born, the house
where he was given as a gift, and
the animal shelter where he
was dropped off two days
later.

Kathleen Embree, who man-
ages the Campbell River SPCA
where Boots ended up, still
recalls the tearful teen who
dropped him off.

“He was given to her as a gift
but her parents, who already
had two dogs and two cats at
home, wouldn’t let her keep
him. The person who gave her
Boots wouldn’t take him back,
so she had few alternatives.”

A fluffy, energetic puppy,
Boots found a new home with-
in the week. But Embree says
the whole sad matter could
have been avoided if getting a
pet was always a family deci-
sion.

“Every member of the family
needs to be involved in the
process and every member of
the family needs to be com-
fortable with the decision. If
even one person is unhappy —
maybe they have allergies,
maybe they find having a pet
too expensive, maybe they didn’t anticipate how much care is
required — more often than not
it’s the animal who pays the
price with a ride to the local
shelter.”

With the Christmas gift-giv-
ing season in full swing, the BC
SPCA and other rescue groups
are trying to discourage pur-
chasings pets as gifts. The
reason is these organizations
regularly deal with the after-
math. And unlike the tacky
Christmas sweater and the
obligatory fruitcake that can be
returned or re-gifted, unwant-
ed animals are more difficult to
manage.

“They’re given with the best
intentions, but often with the
most disastrous results,” says
Embree. "Impulse-buying over-
looks the long-term commit-
tment involved in caring for a
pet.”

Giving a pet as a gift is dis-
couraged at any time of year,
not just at Christmas. The
Burnaby-based Small Animal
Rescue Society inevitably sees
a spike in surrendered bunnies
every October, when the nov-
elty of the baby bunny pur-
chased as a gift at Easter wears
off.

“This is when the rabbit’s hor-
mones kick in, their behaviour
suddenly changes and the kids
lose interest,” says SARS’ Lisa
Hutchison.

“We get about 100 requests to
take unwanted bunnies at that
time.”

If kids want a bunny for East-
er, says Hutchison, “choose
chocolate” or get to know what
caring for a rabbit is all about
by volunteering for a group that
rescues them.

Instead of giving pets as gifts,
the BC SPCA suggests making
your own gift certificate offer-
ing to pay the adoption fee for
a pet, and wrapping up sup-
plies like leashes and collars
to go under the Christmas tree.

Anderson-Fennell is com-
munications officer for the BC
SPCA.

cfennell@spca.bc.ca