

Thinking Twice About Gifting Pets

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

We have all seen those adorable internet videos of someone opening a big, wrapped box and squealing with delight at the sight of a puppy or happy tears shed when someone comes around the corner with a new pet that has a bow on its head.

As appealing as it might seem to choose a furry friend for a gift, according to Kerry Hacecky of Yankton's Heartland Humane Society, which also serves Vermillion, there might be a better way to do it than adding them to the pile of toys as a holiday gift.

"Gift-giving of animals is a little tricky just because the holidays are so hustle and bustle," she said. "Whenever you bring a new animal into your home that's going to be very stressful for that pet to begin with no matter where the pet is coming from. The first few days in any new home are stressful so adding that stress of the holidays and the hustle and bustle and family coming in and out, Christmas trees and wrapping paper is just accumulating more stress for that pet which can make the long-term transition into the home more difficult."

In the end it is better for both the pet and owner to wait for a calmer time to bring them together. There are still ways pets can still make their way into holiday boxes and bows without the issues.

"At Heartland we do work with families to gift pets for Christmas but we do it one of two ways," Hacecky said. "The first way is we have to get an ok from the person who is going to be receiving the pet. So we make that mandatory that the gift-giver works with us and the receiver so it's an adequate fit. If that cat or dog is going to live with someone else we really need to match their personality with the person they're going to be living with not the person picking out the animal."

The other way Hacecky suggests is a gift card.

"If they want to give a cat for a friend they can come in and pay the dues for the cat and we will give them a gift card so while they're not getting the cat on Christmas day they can come in the following week and work with our staff to make sure they're getting a cat that's matching their personality or a dog," she said.

Heartland Humane Society is not the only shelter that feels this way.

"At a national level you will see shelters including Heartland that really push not bringing a cat or a dog home on December 23 or 24 or 25 and waiting until life has calmed down and normal routine is established especially when it comes to taking dogs and putting them into your home," Hacecky said. "The first few weeks of a new pet it's really crucial to focus on routine so Fido gets to go outside at 6 a.m. to go potty



COURTESY PHOTO

Janette Kaddatz, left, and Christa Kranig, right, stand next to the Giving Tree at Heartland Humane Society holding cats Zorro and Willow who are currently available for adoption.

and we walk at this time and eat at this time and if pet owners establish this routine and really stick to it the first few weeks of a new pet they'll have much more success as far as obedience training and house training and things like that. After that trial period you can have a day where it's not regular routine but the dog is now comfortable and used to the family and taking out a routine is ok for a day or two for that dog."

A good way to think about it is to consider on what conditions you would like to be moved to a new home.

"Animals are just like humans in that every cat or dog or rabbit has a different personality," Hacecky said. "A good example right now is we have two puppies right now at Heartland. They're littermates. One is very quiet. He observes, he watches for someone either human or animal to take the lead. He's not very outgoing. His brother on the other hand is very outgoing, very playful very much wanting to socialize and be interacting. That's the same litter and you have two different personalities. Their transitions from shelter to home will be two different stories. The outgoing one will be more about rules than obedience and not jumping and not being over-excited in the home, things like that. Your quiet one is going to be more about being comfortable and not being scared and those kind of things."

It is a comfort for potential adopters to know that there are no surprises when it comes to adopting an animal according to Hacecky.

"What's great about Heartland staff

is we're really candid about every adoption and we're willing to say these are the personality traits we see in the animal and these are some things to be prepared for," she said. "Your timid dogs need a transition to the home where it is quiet and they have the ability to kind of absorb and come out of their shell and your energetic dogs need structure right away so we're not jumping up and we're not chewing on toys unless we're allowed to and we're not jumping on the door, those kind of things. With cats it's the same thing. You have cats who are very timid and very quiet and they need that time to kind of observe the household and investigate. People who are adopting the little kittens who are crawling up on the counters and couches and stuff you need to stop that from happening right away if you don't want that in the future so we talk about training techniques on that."

Matching personalities of potential pet owners and adoptable pets is taken seriously at the shelter because, after all, we are talking about a permanent situation, another reason pets make complicated gifts.

"We talk with adopters about their expectations and about their routine," Hacecky said. "Are they looking for an animal that is going to cuddle with them on the couch or are they looking for an animal to go with them on walks with regularly? Do they want a dog they can run with? Do they want an animal their kids can roll around on the floor with? We try to identify the top three or four things that person is looking for and their dealbreakers. So if a cat bites their kid is that a deal breaker? If their dog

has an accident in the house on day two is that a deal breaker? After you identify those we can look at your options based on what we know of the animals.

"Once those are identified we can start matching and then it's up to the adopter to decide which they like best. Most adopters will look at two things: one is the appearance of the animal. Some people are drawn to multicolored cats or black dogs and the other one is really kind of size.

Essentially we come up with a great match."

According to Hacecky, December has been a fairly busy month for Heartland Humane Society.

"We are still encouraging adoptions," she said. "We will be open up until noon on the 24th but we're closing general adoptions on the 23. We always have our adopt one, get a sibling for free so if you're looking to take a kitten home we encourage you to take a litter mate with them. We have the puppy pair as well if you're looking for two dogs. There are donors who have come forward and are paying adoption fees on a few select animals. If you are interested in adopting still this month let us know and we can talk to you and show some of the animals that are on promotion and find one to fit your needs."

Those who wish to help the homeless pets can visit the shelter's Tree of Giving.

Some possible critter Christmas gifts include clumping cat litter, paper towels or toilet paper, postage stamps, cat food (preferred Purina or Iams), dog food (preferred Purina), bleach and liquid laundry detergent.

For current pet owners and animal lovers, Hacecky calls for assistance in helping make sure all pets, homes or no, are safe during this South Dakota winter.

"We have been really working feverishly to get some of the animals living outside into shelter," she said. "So if you know someone who is keeping their animal outside and they don't have adequate facilities, we encourage you to talk to them about their options, either helping your neighbor or your friend create some adequate outdoor facilities for their dogs and cats or suggest just contacting us and talk about rehoming that animal. Winters in South Dakota are tough and it's ok to leave animals outside if you have the structure and facilities for them but there have been a lot of calls about animals being left outside without shelter and water and those things this month. If the public can help keep those animals safe we are taking those calls and trying to help out as we can."

For more information contact the Heartland Humane Society at 605-664-4244, email HHSA@midconetwork.com, or visit the shelter at 3400 East Highway 50 in Yankton.

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