

rescue groups

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Publisher's note:

The Suncoast Bichon Club is looking for someone to donate the use of their property for one day to hold their Annual Bichon Spring Picnic – March, 2008. If you are able to help out, please contact Calvin or Penny at 727.323.6844 or 727.421.2955. The event raises money for Small Paws.

Small Paws for a **BIG CAUSE**

One of the biggest, not-for-profit rescue groups in the country rescues a small breed, the Bichon Frise. Small Paws now has about 6000 members and 800 volunteers around the country. In Florida, there are 78 volunteers with 20 of those in the Tampa Bay area, from Pasco to Sarasota.

Small Paws Rescue was formed almost ten years ago in Tulsa, Oklahoma by Robin Pressnall after visiting a couple of puppy mills and was horrified to see the conditions in which the animals were living. She thought she was visiting a legitimate breeder both times, looking for a Bichon Frise. Puppy mills are especially hard on female dogs, where after they turn six months old are bred every six months, and become over-bred. The milk it takes to feed all the puppies pulls the calcium away from the mother's teeth, often resulting in severe dental problems. Living in cages their entire lives, these dogs have not been socialized. It is a policy of Small Paws Rescue and many rescue groups, that foster homes have at least one other spayed or neutered dog to help in the social rehabilitation of the rescued dog.

Local volunteer, Heather Fisher, became involved with Small Paws Rescue by accident in January, 2004. After months of research, she and her husband purchased their first dog ever, a Bichon puppy, from a local breeder. Surfing the internet for help on how to train and what to feed their new member of the family, Heather came upon the Small Paws Rescue website (www.smallpawsrescue.org) where she first learned about puppy mills. "Here I was, thirty-three years old and this was the first time I'd heard about puppy mills and how those little puppies really get to the pet stores," said Heather.

After contacting the rescue group's executive director, Robin Pressnall, asking her what she could do to help, Heather became a volunteer, maintaining their database. Of course, she and her husband have become foster parents to a number of Bichon's over the years, including two who became permanent members of the Fisher family. Brant Cramer, a member of the



Photography by Daniela, IL. Copyright 2007

One of the many white furballs who attended the Suncoast Bichon Club's Spring Picnic.

board of directors for Small Paws Rescue, lives in central Florida and has been involved with the Florida team since 1999.

The Fishers fostered their first rescue once their own puppy was a year old. **Hannah**, the rescued Bichon, was flown to the Bay area from a Tulsa veterinarian's office, two weeks after she had been rescued from a puppy mill in Missouri. The dog was about seven years old, very scared, smelled bad and wanted nothing to do with the Fishers or their own Bichon. Heather explains, "I cried. I thought I was doing this great thing, helping out the rescue group and here was this dog that didn't want the love and affection I was ready to shower on her." Even though Heather read the literature the rescue group had given her on what to expect, she wasn't prepared for such an unresponsive dog, who wouldn't even take a treat. Puppy mill dogs don't understand "treats" or "love." They don't even know what grass is. Hannah's toes were deformed from having walked on only wire from within the confines of her cage. She didn't know affection, she didn't play and she was frightened of everything.

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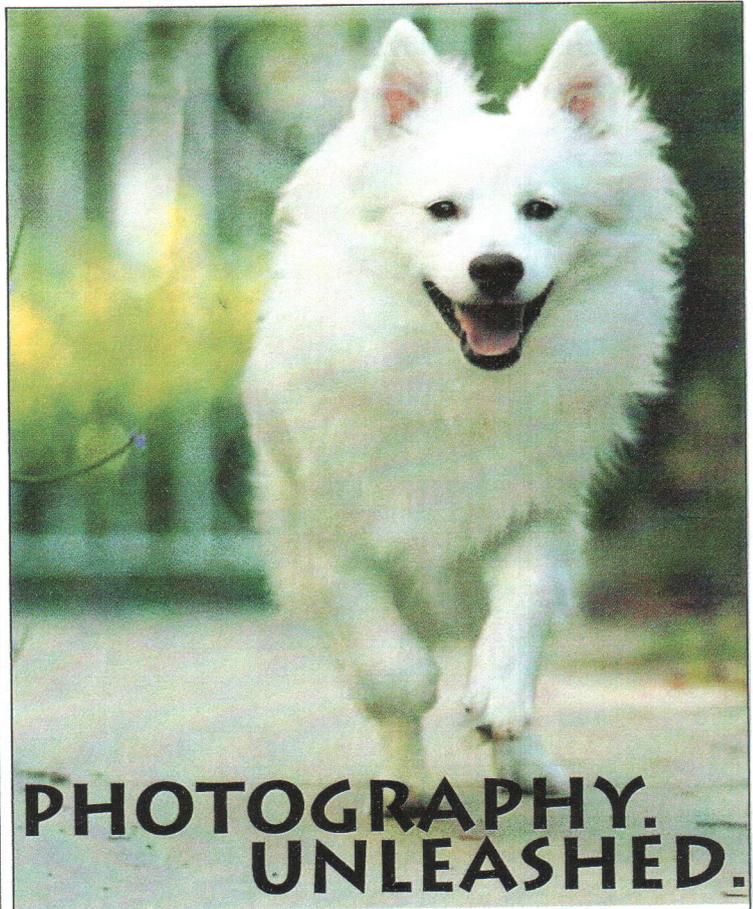
But patience and perseverance paid off as Hannah learned to become a pet. She was soon adopted by a couple who had recently had their own Bichon pass away. A month later, Heather fell in love with another puppy mill rescue. "I saw her on the adoptable dogs' page and she just called out to me. I named her *Willow*, after the beautiful tree that bends to the wind instead of breaking



Steven and Heather Fisher with Breezly, Willow and Echo.

under pressure," said Heather. That was four years ago, and no one who first saw Willow back then, can believe the now-friendly, loving, secure and beautiful Bichon is that same cowering, skinny shaved dog. Heather adds, "The saddest part of Willow's story is that in addition to having lived in a two by two cage and birthing her puppies in captivity, she herself is a product of the lack of breeding standards puppy mills employ. As a result, she has juvenile cataracts and retinal degeneration, so she is about eighty percent blind." These are genetic problems that can be avoided by careful breeding. But in Willow's case, she was bred for quantity, not quality. So there is a good chance that all of her puppies could have the same traits. "Poor, unsuspecting pet store shoppers," said Heather.

The Fisher's senior Bichon rescue, *Echo*, is a former show dog who outlived her owner. And since no one else in the family wanted her, she was headed for a shelter. "So off I went, in spite of the fact that my husband had just said the day before that we should take a break from fostering for a while," said Heather. Echo was an overweight senior with a thinning, poorly-groomed coat and terrible breath. Once home, Heather began to assess the dog's personality and coordinate with the Florida Small Paws Rescue team leader on where the dog would be fostered. As Heather was on the phone with the team leader, she heard her husband say in the background that Echo could stay for a few days until the right foster home was found. That turned into "she can stay with us until she gets adopted." After two weeks Heather put Echo's information up on Petfinder so she could be seen for adoption. Within a couple of days, Heather's husband decided that no one was ever going to love that dog like he did. And Echo found her forever-home with the Fishers. 🐾



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