

# For the Love of Dogs

Bend filmmaker strives to inspire hopes, passions with documentary about Chilean street dogs

by Gail Elizabeth Kretchmer, for *The Bulletin Special Projects*

Last year, a street dog risked its life to rescue another dog from oncoming traffic on a busy highway in Santiago, Chile.

The heroic act was captured on video and watched around the world on news channels and YouTube, touching the hearts of thousands.

But while most of us watched the story and then returned to our daily lives, one Bend resident was compelled to do more.

Vanessa Schulz was “flabbergasted” when she saw the heroic dog video, and she immediately began to learn more. She discovered there are an estimated 220,000 homeless dogs in Chile, and in February, she headed to South America to produce a film documentary about the plight of these street dogs.

Once there, she found conditions more horrific than she’d imagined, but she was also inspired by the passion and hope she saw in the local dog lovers.

Schulz has always been an animal lover. She grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa raising dogs and riding horses, and family vacations were spent in game reserves looking for wild animals. But disturbing media images from her childhood lingered in her mind.

One photo showed an elephant hanging from a crane. Another depicted donkeys electrocuted and then forced into a swimming pool.

I was only about 8—maybe 10—when I saw these,” she said, “but the horror never dims.”

Greenpeace videos and other films about the animal world further influenced her when she grew older. In the movie, “The Big Blue,” Schulz explained, someone goes “so far into the element of another animal that he not only fully understands it, he becomes it.”

Ultimately, she vowed to spend her life trying to help animals.

As a filmmaker, Schulz has produced several award-winning documentaries about African wildlife, the American trapping industry, sustainability through permaculture, and the reintroduction of the gray wolf into the United States.

Filmmaker/activist Vanessa Schulz greets one of the many Chilean street dogs she filmed on her sojourn to South America. Photos submitted.



“One of the saddest sights was watching this puppy walking away, slowly, with nowhere to go. At least for this day it was with a full stomach.”

She was looking for her next project when she saw the Chilean dog video.

“And you know what it does to you,” she said.

In a matter of weeks, she packed up her passport, a small set of traveling clothes, and her film equipment to set off for South America to film the homeless dogs.

“My hope was that the documentary would serve as an initiative to drive other goals,” she said.



These goals include the local government sponsorship of animal shelters and increased global awareness (and funding) about the animals and their needs.

“Animals need a voice,” she said.

Once in South America, she met other dog lovers including animal rights activist David Gómez.

“My girlfriend and I were looking at her because it is very strange to see someone taking pictures or filming stray dogs,” Gómez said. “We got close and

asked why. The commitment to come from so far away to help animals here is impressive.”

Schulz also met veterinarians, government officials, and everyday people. One woman had 28 dogs and 11 cats in her small home, and another had more than 100 dogs in hers. A newspaperman kept 15 dogs in his home and cared for another 35 dogs on the street.

There were people with few resources who took food and blankets out to the streets for the dogs at night.

And one very special woman, named Gabriela, regularly visited the homeless dogs on the outskirts of Santiago, in an area Schulz described as “dreadfully poor, lined with trash ... a dumpsite not only for sewage but for unwanted dogs.”

The project was much more difficult than Schulz anticipated. She found herself on dangerous streets, slept on a couch shared with 10 or more animals, tolerated living arrangements without running water, and struggled with broken film equipment.

But the greatest hardship was seeing the dogs firsthand—often diseased, injured, or orphaned—and then having to leave them behind.

One dog had been burned with boiling water. Another had been thrown through a plate glass window. One was missing a leg; another was blind in one eye.

And all of them were hungry.

Schulz wrote in her blog one day about a dog to whom she brought food. He ate with gusto, but watching him eat was bittersweet.

“One of the saddest sights,” she said, “was watching this

puppy walking away, slowly, with nowhere to go. At least for this day it was with a full stomach.”

During the several weeks she was in Chile, Schulz grew increasingly determined to help in whatever way she could.

She rescued Bob, a maggot-infected cocker spaniel, and Rinco, an orphaned puppy. She helped evacuate abandoned pets from a small town that had emptied during Mt. Chaiten's volcanic eruption a year ago. She served as a role model for families who saw Schulz's passion and active approach to problem solving.

And she created 65 hours of film footage for her



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"It is amazing to meet a so focused person," Gómez said. "She is taking action, [which] is more important and relevant than tears."

Once back home in Bend, Schulz began the next phase of her project: raising funds and turning the film footage into a full-length documentary that Gómez hopes will show the "reality hidden behind speeches about progress and economic development."

But she couldn't forget the dogs she met.

After learning that some of them were poisoned after she left, including one she said had the "endearing habit of licking my face," she arranged for the adoption of several dogs in the United States and plans to personally accompany them on their travels.

Sitting at an outdoor table on a warm day in Bend with her

own dog, Digby, lying at her feet, Schulz appears to be a relaxed and gentle soul. But on the inside, her heart is clearly afire with love and energy to help the animal world.

In fact, her philosophy on the value of life is incorporated into the mission statement of 21st Paradigm, her nonprofit company: "Not only the pretty birds but also the predators and reptiles, the ugly and unloved have a right to be left in peace, to exist not only for the pleasure and health and instruction of humans but for their own sake."

Digby looks up at her with his big brown eyes, thumps his tail, and smiles. He's well-fed, safe and healthy, and he seems to know he's one lucky dog.

*For more information about Schulz's work, visit her Web site and blog at [www.21paradigm.com](http://www.21paradigm.com).*

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