

Local effort aims to battle dog-fighting

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

The shocking case of NFL legend Michael Vick has rocked a nation and shed new light on a sector of people who greatly prefer the shadows.

Vick, who was sentenced to 23 months in prison for his involvement in illegal dogfighting earlier this month, unwittingly incited a firestorm of heated debates about the issue of dogfighting and its place, or lack thereof, in today's society.

Despite being a criminal offense, the "sport" has infiltrated nearly every corner of this nation, and Winston-Salem is no exception. In fact, North Carolina is considered one of the biggest dogfighting states in the country, according to Forsyth County Animal Control Shelter Manager Matt Smith.

Smith also volunteers on the outreach committee for Forsyth Humane Society, a local non-profit that provides shelter for displaced animals until they can be placed in permanent homes. He helped to form a new campaign to raise awareness about animal cruelty issues - specifically dogfighting and its prevalence in the area - and to provide a positive outlet for the anger and helplessness that many people feel as a result.

"Animal fighting, of course is sort of the pinnacle of animal abuse and stupidity," Smith declared. "A lot of people get really angry about this ... and there's no outlet."

Dubbed LEAF (Let's End Animal Fighting), the new campaign celebrated its kickoff Saturday, as representatives from the two organizations passed out wristbands and dog tags bearing the LEAF logo to supporters who visited the sites.

The purpose of the campaign is three fold, encompassing an awareness component, an education aspect, and a way for people to feel empowered to take action and help bring an end to these heinous practices, Smith says.

The wristbands and dog tags will serve as the awareness arm



Rex Welton poses with one of the four-legged friends at the Forsyth Humane Society.

in the program. LEAF supporters are also encouraged to sign fabric leaves, which will be displayed at the Arts Unleashed event in April 2008.

Fliers and brochures provide concerned residents the tools they need to spot signs of animal fighting, and how to report suspected dog- or cock-fighting activities.

Perhaps the greatest thrust of the new campaign is the education component, which was deliberately broad and open to interpretation, Smith says.

"We were trying to think of certain interesting ways to maybe tie in animal welfare with education in ways that hasn't really been done before," he explained. "We started looking at ways that you could do some things educationally, not just for kids, but with adults too that would allow more people to get

involved in things like animal welfare, and to really be able to tie it in with all forms of education."

Representatives from LEAF are available to visit schools and other organizations to educate people about the importance of treating animals humanely.

As director of Donor and Community Relations at the Forsyth Humane Society, Rex Welton has spent the past eight years speaking to groups of youngsters about issues surrounding animal welfare, and believes that children are an important demographic to address.

"The earlier you can get to kids and teach them about what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad, it really does sink in," he remarked. "In the case of animal fighting, maybe kids don't have a lot of control over what is or what happens or what doesn't happen right now, but you can educate them, alert them."

Smith is hopeful the cam-

aign will reach some adults who are steeped in a lifetime of bad habits and inspire them to change as well.

"I really want to stress that it's not just for kids," he said. "Different seeds are being planted all the time that can change your outlook and change the way you feel about things."

Both Smith and Welton say that it will take time for the effectiveness of the program to shine through. They intend for the campaign to be an ongoing effort, Smith says.

"We may not see a big decrease in the instance of animal fighting immediately," Welton surmised, "but hopefully, within five to 10 years, we'll start to see a decline."

For more information about the LEAF campaign or any of the services that the organizations offer, contact the Forsyth County Department of Animal Control at 703-2490; or Forsyth Humane Society at 773-7700.

State Progressive Democrats endorses Besse for Lt. Governor

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

The Progressive Democrats of NC have endorsed City Council Member Dan Besse's bid to be the state's next lieutenant governor.

Besse received the nod Dec. 8 during a Progressive Democrats meeting in Chapel Hill.

Pete MacDowell, President of PDNC, said, "The strong majority vote which Dan received reflects the fact that the membership was impressed by the fact that Dan has walked his talk as a consistent and effective advocate for the environment and other progressive causes for decades."

Besse spoke to the gathering of Democrats, as did Hampton Dellinger and Pat Smathers, who are also seeking the Democratic nomina-



Besse

tion next year for lieutenant governor.

In the general election, the membership resolved to support whichever candidate is victorious in the Democratic primary. The PDNC candidate questionnaire and the candidate responses can be found in their entirety at www.pdncpac.org.

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