

Walnut the dog makes history

By Deborah R. Meyer

Add Walnut to the annals of Chatham County history.

On March 7 the Chatham Chapter of the Coalition to Unchain Dogs built Walnut a fence. As he romped off his new digs, Walnut didn't care that his fence was built for free. What mattered to him is that he is finally free to do what dogs should do – run around and play in a safe environment.

Yes, history was made and the coalition will keep on making it. Its goal? To offer these free services to any dog owner in Chatham County who wants their dog to live chain-free. Besides erecting a fence, the coalition will install a doghouse, and have a dog spayed or neutered.

"How many things in life are free?" said John Denardo, the coalition's outreach coordinator. His job is to talk to potential fence recipients, explain the program and convince people that there is no hidden agenda. Every cent of the coalition's efforts comes from donors. Everyone involved in the coalition is a volunteer.

Denardo moved here recently and with a strong professional past working in animal welfare, looked to get involved here as a volunteer in the field. "When I found the coalition it was a wonderful way to get involved in something that I think is very special. It is a terrific way to help individual dogs as well as their people," said Denardo.

Durham resident Amanda Arrington along with a group of volunteers founded the coalition in August 2006. In March 2007 the coalition built its first fence and since then have built fences that enabled over 500 dogs to be unchained. There are five chapters in North Carolina — Durham, Raleigh, Charlotte, Chatham County and the Triad, one in Richmond, Virginia and one in Washington, DC. "The coalition has such great volunteers because everyone knows or has known a chained dog and what the coalition does is tangible. When you volunteer for just a couple of hours you can see a dog go from despondent, aggressive or fearful to happy, relaxed and running around. Very rarely in animal rescue work do you get instant gratification and with this work you get just that. It is so much fun and addictive," said Arrington.

Toni Constant, the director of the Chatham coalition, wanted there to



Volunteers in the Chatham chapter of the Coalition to Unchain Dogs watch as Walnut races around his new fenced-in yard in Siler City.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TONI CONSTANT

be a coalition in Chatham before she even knew such a group existed.

Retired from her position teaching technical theater at East Chapel Hill High School, Constant was exploring what her next move would be.

One day she was walking through a Siler City neighborhood. "Every dog I saw in one afternoon was on a chain. It hit me like a bolt from the blue. Okay, this is my next mission," Constant said. She set up a table at Woof-A-Palooza, the dog event extraordinaire put on in September by Chatham Animal Rescue and Education, Inc. advertising that she wanted to start a group to get dogs off chains. She was contacted by the coalition. Arrington wanted to start a Chatham chapter of the group. An

informational meeting was held January 1 at Gracepoint in Pittsboro. Thirty-seven people came. Constant already has a list of about a dozen dogs that are on chains and whose owners the coalition wants to offer services to. "We are on a roll here," said Constant.

"We are really about the dog. We don't presume to walk in any one else's shoes or pass judgment. These people love their dogs and want what is best and most can't afford a fence. If we didn't put it up it wouldn't happen. That kind of win-win and non-judgmental approach is the way to change the world. We educate by example and not by lecturing and pointing fingers," Constant said.

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Robin Luker was one of those who attended the Gracepoint meeting. She is now Chatham's volunteer coordinator. She and her husband Bill are big animal lovers and with their son off to the Marine Corps this past summer, she had empty nest syndrome. "We signed up at the meeting to be volunteers. We already had a couple of dogs in mind in Pittsboro that we wanted to get into the program," Luker said. "I want to tell everybody about the coalition. Dogs deserve to run around and play," Luker said.

Her husband Bill dug the fence holes for Walnut's fence. Luker did a variety of tasks on March 7 as the fence was being erected, including playing with Walnut. She struggled to put into words the emotions that coursed through her as she watched Walnut race around his new enclosure joyously chasing a ball. "I just know the feelings are what I want everybody to get. The same feeling we get building fences. That amazing feeling," Luker said.

To find out more about the coalition go to www.unchaindogs.net. Contact the coalition to volunteer, donate materials or tell about a dog that needs to be unchained at chatham@unchaindogs.net. Join its listserve chathamunchaindogs@yahoo.com.

Deborah R. Meyer is a Chatham writer. She can be contacted at 942.3252.

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