

The Dog Rescuer

By Champ Clark

Steve McGarva Moved to Puerto Rico in Search of Sun and Fun. What He Found Was a New Purpose: Saving the Island's Abandoned Dogs

Steve McGarva had read that Puerto Rico's Playa Lucia was the beach to go to. A newcomer to the island, he anticipated spending a lot of time there, indulging his passion for kite surfing. But McGarva had no idea how right—and wrong—this expectation would turn out to be. To locals, Playa Lucia was known as Dead Dog Beach, a notorious dumping ground for unwanted dogs. And McGarva was about to become its full-time lifeguard.

McGarva had just stepped onto the sand when an emaciated Husky stumbled towards him. Soon more dogs appeared. "I'd never seen dogs so skinny," says McGarva. "I couldn't walk away with a clear conscience."

What McGarva, 42, witnessed that October morning in 2005 was striking evidence of Puerto Rico's complex relationship with pets. While many of the island's families lovingly keep dogs and cats, its streets are home to as many as 100,000 strays—malnourished and, in some cases, abused. With only six animal shelters serving the island, beaches like Playa Lucia become a home of last resort. "As soon as they're not a cute puppy anymore, dogs are thrown away," says McGarva, who sees poverty and tradition as the root causes of the practice.

In a particularly brutal incident last October, animal control workers in the town of Barceloneta rounded up dozens of dogs and cats and illegally threw them off a 50-ft. bridge. "In our culture we have not addressed these issues because, probably, we didn't think they were important," Carlos Carazo of Puerto Rico's state office for animal control told *The New York Times*. "But this is probably the time to start thinking about it."

McGarva, a Canadian-born sculptor who arrived on the island when his American wife, Pam, got a two-year assignment with a pharmaceutical company there, went to work on behalf of the strays of Dead Dog Beach. Each morning he would carry in five-gallon buckets of food purchased with his own money, sometimes costing \$1,000 a month. Unable to find a vet in nearby Yabucoa willing to help, McGarva taught himself to stitch the dogs' wounds and even set broken bones. "They would be so happy to see me, like they'd known me forever," he says. Along with giving each dog a name and a dose of daily affection, McGarva says he also buried more than 1,000 dogs that didn't make it.

Praised by some animal lovers, McGarva's work—and efforts by a network of rescuers he enlisted on and

off the island—also touched a raw nerve. He took to the media accounts of inhumane conditions at the beach, like the alcohol-fueled parties he witnessed at which gunmen used dogs for target practice. He found other dogs splattered by paint balls. "Steve brought everything out in the public eye," says Dr. Rafael Ramos, a prominent San Juan vet who helped McGarva. "The amount of abuse and neglect going on was incredible."

Unable to convince seemingly indifferent local officials to take action, McGarva arranged for 270 dogs to be whisked off the island for adoption (including the two he now owns himself). "He's one of those guys who had dedicated everything to something he believes in," says Ginny Cornett, a Florida organizer who has raised money for neutering and spaying at Dead Dog Beach. "He went to that beach every day for two years."

McGarva's time in Puerto Rico ended last summer, when his wife's work assignment was completed. Not a moment too soon, says Pam: "Steve was on the edge of a breakdown." Since moving to Rhode Island—where he is studying sculpture—Steve has made several trips back to Playa Lucia, where volunteers continue his efforts and there are fewer dogs. Yabucoa's mayor Angel Garcia has announced plans for a humane animal shelter serving the city and told PEOPLE, "I want the dogs to be safe." Says McGarva: "I'm more optimistic now than I've ever been. There seems to be a glimmer of hope."