

Santa Paws elevates animals to full family member status

By Kathryn Reed

"You can say any foolish thing to a dog, and the dog will give you a look that says, 'My God, you're right! I never would've thought of that!'" – Dave Barry

Apparently you can do some foolish things with them, too, and get the same result. Like taking them in for a family photo with Santa Paws.

They stand in line more obediently than many a child. They play nice with strangers – unlike some children. And they willingly go – no whining involved.



Gary and Lorna
Lefler with
their
menagerie and
Santa Paws.
Photo/Dawn
Armstrong

Now in its 25th year, Santa Paws is Lake Tahoe Humane Society's most well known fundraiser.

Each year someone puts on a hot costume – Santa Paws – and spends hours having people and animals on his or her lap as

the camera clicks away.

"The pets are great. The owners can be the problem. I have to tell the people to be quiet. I need to tell them to stop calling their pet because they are looking at them and not me," Dawn Armstrong, who runs the Humane Society and is chief photographer at the event, said.

She has been part of Santa Paws for 20 of the 25 years it has been going on in South Lake Tahoe. She started with a Polaroid camera. Each picture was \$5.

Now she uses a digital camera, it costs \$20 and people are given a disc with multiple pictures.

This will be the first year the event has been at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center. With it completely inside and there being plenty of room, it should be better for the several dozen people who turn out each year.

More than 60 people usually show up, with 91 being the record.

Ray Petragallo is planning to be at the event next weekend with his granddaughter. Last year was the first time they had been at the Santa Paws event with her St. Bernard and his Weimaraner.

"My dog put the Santa Paws glove in its mouth and would not give it back. A lady came over with a treat and they traded. He gave up the glove," Petragallo said. "These people are so good with these dogs."

Judy Brown, who is on the Humane Society's board of directors, said accidents are rare and when an aggressive dog comes in, he is shown the back door.

Many regulars come back year after year. Kids get older and bigger, and sometimes the pets are different.

Sometimes it's the animal just with Santa Paws. Sometimes it's

a single person. Sometimes it's the whole family. And many times the animals are dressed up.

Many people use these as Christmas photos that get sent far and wide.

For Brooke Laine, she showed up last year with two dogs – her Border Collie, Pepper, and her son's Lab, Buddy.

She and the dogs are her son, Matt's, wallpaper on his laptop.

Laine plans to be back this year.

"It's super fun and it's for a good cause," Laine said.

Dogs and cats dominate the animals brought in to be photographed. But birds, a snake, bunnies and ferrets are been part of the fun.

"Last year we had ferrets. They came near the end. It was a hoot. They had them all dressed up," Armstrong said. "After they left, then the dogs were really weird. They wouldn't get near Santa Paws. Ferrets stink."

And, yes, animals and their humans do look alike, Armstrong said.

Santa Paws is Dec. 3 from 11am-4pm at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center, 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd., South Lake Tahoe. Cost is \$20 – cash or check. For more information, call (530) 542.2857. Proceeds benefit the Lake Tahoe Humane Society. Donations of dry dog and cat food will be accepted for the Emergency Pet Food Bank.

