

Canine day-care worker leads charity drive for pet supplies

Jennifer Salvatore, 53

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Not many people know this, but one of Santa's elves has left the North Pole for good and taken up residence right here in northern Palm Beach County.

Her name is Jennifer Salvatore and she lives in Palm Beach Gardens with her husband Thomas, an architect. She coordinates special programs for dogs at Palm Beach Paw Spa, a canine day care in Jupiter, which is where she is doing Santa's work.



Salvatore is the driving force behind the second annual Palm Beach Paw Spa's pet supply drive to benefit Safe Harbor Animal Sanctuary in Jupiter. She's watching merrily as patrons of the spa fill the lobby with cans of dog food, dog collars, treats, blankets and pet beds.

Last year's drive was marvelous, she said, but this year's is even better.

"We have so much already. I think we are going to outdo last year," said Salvatore, a native of London who is affectionately known at the spa as "the nanny."

Her identical twin sister, Brenda, also works at the spa, which creates an air of lighthearted confusion.

"Oh, yes, there is confusion over who's who. But as we get older we look less alike," Salvatore said.

The relationship between Safe Harbor and the Paw Spa dates to the spa's opening in 2004.

Spa owners Tracy and Matt McCord went to Safe Harbor to train their own beloved Wheaton terrier to be a therapy dog.

They liked what they saw at Safe Harbor, a no-kill animal shelter.

And as soon as they opened the spa, they also opened their doors to Safe Harbor's trainers to use the facility for classes.

Now, Salvatore and the rest of the staff are carrying that relationship a step further by collecting supplies for the shelter. Salvatore says they need everything that has anything to do with caring for a dog.

In addition to providing the basics such as canned and dry dog food and bowls, Salvatore hopes to receive the little extras such as toys and blankets that will help give a homey feel to the shelter.

"We need everything and it doesn't have to be brand new either," she said.

Salvatore moved to South Florida from Southern California two years ago to be near her family. It didn't take her long to learn about one of the subtropic's greatest natural threats to dogs.

"The whole thing with the bufo toad. Sometimes there are five or six of them outside our door. They could kill my dog," said Salvatore, proud owner of Emma, a Shih Tzu.

In a nutshell, the bufo toad is Florida's largest frog. In threatening situations, the frog secretes a toxic milky substance that is highly irritating to humans and can kill cats and dogs if they ingest it.

Salvatore thinks awareness and education are the best tools to battle the bufo.

Ever the animal lover, she tries to see the situation from the frog's point of view as well.

"I feel bad about the toads. It's not their fault," she said.

Salvatore developed her love of animals when she was a child

Her family left London to live on a chicken farm in Farmington, England, when she was small. They lived there until moving to the United States when she was 10.

So being around animals all day feels perfectly natural to her.

"Working here is like being at home. The day I walked in here, I knew I had found the right job."