

'Champions,' A Story Of Tragedy And Triumph

BY ALYSSA MELILLO

Little Red was once scared to walk through the doorway into her new home. Cherry cowered and trembled at the sight of new people. Handsome Dan was afraid to go on walks with his family.

The abuse and trauma these pit bulls had faced was still too fresh. And they were just three of the 50-plus dogs rescued from Bad Newz Kennels, the dog fighting operation once run by Michael Vick, who was, at the time, the star quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons.

In 2007, police raided a compound run by Mr. Vick and several accomplices behind his Virginia home. At first, he denied the charges, but eventually pleaded guilty to not only running the ring, but even shooting, drowning, hanging and electrocuting the dogs that did not perform as desired in fights.

Mr. Vick was sentenced to two years in prison. The rescued dogs were sentenced to lifetimes of mistrust, haunted by their



Paul Flaccione with Cherry, one of the dogs rescued from NFL quarterback Michael Vick's dog fighting ring. Right, Heather Gutshall with Handsome Dan.



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memories, but hopefully on a track to better days—the journey filmmaker Darcy Dennett documented in her film "The Champions," which will make its world premiere on Saturday at the Hamptons International Film Festival, and will receive the Zelda Penzel "Giving Voice to the Voiceless" Award.

The documentary is headlining the 23rd annual film festival's new signature program centered on Compassion, Justice & Animal Rights, a category for stories that promote and help create a safe and humane world for animals, no matter the circumstances.

"It's so interesting that one

would presume that the pit bulls rescued from Michael Vick's fighting ring would be aggressive, but I found it not to be the case," Ms. Dennett said during a telephone interview last week while walking around Manhattan. "After spending time with the dogs, it became clear that they were more a victim of their own reputation than anything."

Ms. Dennett first encountered the dogs in January 2008 while working as the producer for National Geographic's series "DogTown" about the Best Friends Animal Society, an animal sanctuary in Kanab, Utah, which happened to take in 22 of the pit bulls rescued from Mr. Vick's

compound. The government had deemed them the most difficult to rehabilitate from the group.

The Best Friends team was their only hope for a second chance at life. Even animal advocacy organizations, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, and the Humane Society of the United States, had suggested they be destroyed, as they were thought to be a danger to people and other animals.

It was only natural for Ms. Dennett to be nervous around them, but only at first. She said she quickly realized the dogs were not the bloodthirsty fighters they were unwillingly trained to be—

at least not deep down.

"It was pretty clear that it was going to be a fairly long road for some," she explained. "I just sort of knew that it was an incredible story. And that no one had told it."

Two years ago, Ms. Dennett assembled a crew and, with the help of Best Friends and another rescue organization, Badrap, she connected with the people who had adopted some of the better-adjusted pit bulls. Two of them were Paul and Melissa Flaccione.

They had happened to watch the "DogTown" episode and after seeing Cherry, as fearful and withdrawn as he was, the couple submitted an adoption application, patiently waiting for the day they could finally meet the pit bull and bring him home.

"I was kind of just drawn to him. He was so shut down and so shy," Mr. Flaccione said during a telephone interview last week. "He just looked so alone. This dog just really needed help, and we thought we could help him."

It took many hours, perseverance and, most of all, patience, for Cherry to finally feel comfortable in his new home. At first, the dog never showed signs of wanting attention or affection from anyone other than the family's other pit bull, Madison. But the time came to slowly introduce Cherry to other people, especially during public appearances, including the one he will make during the film's premiere this weekend.

He is more than ready.

While the approximately 9-year-old pit bull is still recovering from the darker part of his life, Cherry has found it within him to forgive the species he once feared more than anything, Mr. Flaccione said, noting the rugged scar on the dog's back—likely the result of being doused with chemicals to get him to fight.

"Humans tend to play the victim card and blame their past for things, but dogs don't do that," Mr. Flaccione said. "I've become such a better person because of Cherry. He gives back to us tenfold what we give to him."

Cherry's story turns out to be a positive and uplifting one, which is representative of the timbre of "The Champions" and deliberate, according to Ms. Dennett. The director said she made careful decisions about what to omit, including the more grueling details of the case, undercover footage of the dog fighting and vivid eyewitness accounts of Mr. Vick's compound, as outlined in a USDA investigative report.

But what Ms. Dennett did not intentionally leave out was Mr. Vick himself. Outside of clips from news broadcasts, he is absent from the film, as he declined multiple interview requests.

"I would've liked for him to have a voice. I would have preferred it," the director said. "I was definitely disappointed."

Regardless, the film's message remains the same. After "The Champions" premieres, Ms. Dennett said she hopes the documentary will not only shed light on the vicious act of dog fighting, but the negative stereotype surrounding pit bulls.

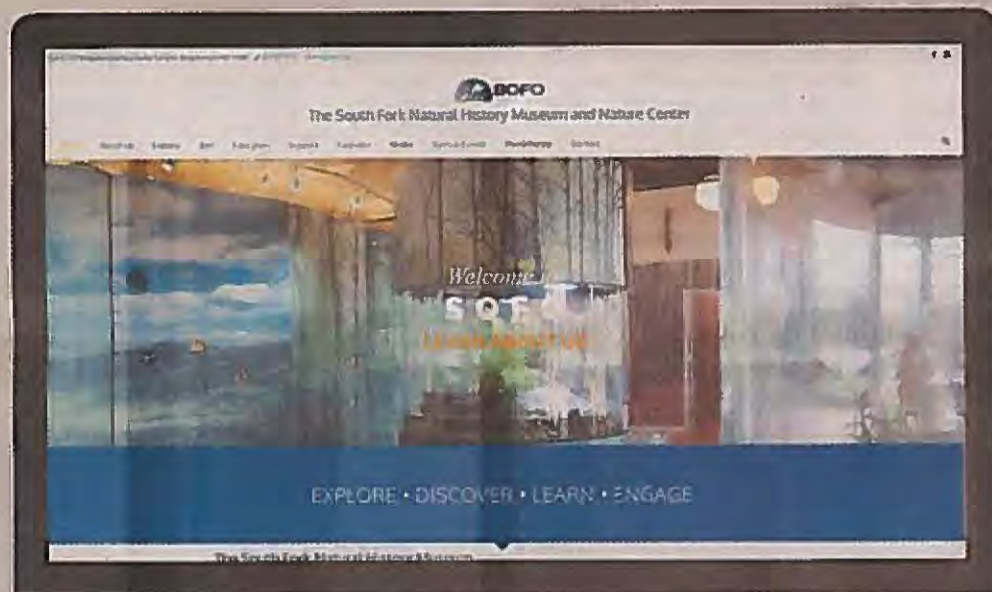
"Pit bulls are probably the most euthanized dogs in America and there are shelters that are filled with them," she said. "Hopefully, it will inspire other filmmakers to make films on topics like animal welfare. It's up to us to speak for them."

"The Champions" will make its world premiere on Saturday, October 10, at 1:30 p.m. at Regal East Hampton Cinema, followed by a Q&A with director Darcy Dennett and guests. An encore screening will be held on Monday, October 12, at 11 a.m. at Sag Harbor Cinema. Additional films in the "Compassion, Justice & Animal Rights" programming include the documentary "How to Change the World" about the Greenpeace movement on Saturday, October 10, at 7:30 p.m. at the East Hampton Library and "Captain Fish," a seven-minute French short in the "Ahoy! Shorts for All Ages" programming, on Sunday, October 11, at the East Hampton Library and Monday, October 12, at 11:30 a.m. at Regal East Hampton Cinema.

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