

Task force raids late-night pit bull fight in Dallas

DALLAS (AP) — Scores of people attending a high-stakes pit bulldog fight scattered when authorities raided the event, which was being staged in a sparsely settled wooded area in southeast Dallas County.

"Many escaped through the thick underbrush that marked the area, and no doubt hid until the activity was over and our officers left, but a total of 56 persons were apprehended," Dallas County sheriff's office spokesman Jim Ewell told the Associated Press on Sunday.

The raid by officers of the Greater Dallas Area Organized Crime Task Force followed a tip from an informant that a pit bulldog fight was being staged Saturday night, said Ewell, public information officer for the sheriff's office.

A 37-year-old man, who lived in a house

near where the fight was held, was booked early Sunday into Lew Sterrett Justice Center for investigation of a felony complaint of operating a facility used for dog fighting, Ewell said. Bond was set at \$2,500.

Another man, a former convict, was arrested for possession of a pistol, a felony.

The other 54 were released after being cited to appear later in Justice of the Peace court in Mesquite, an east Dallas suburb, Ewell said.

No dogs were captured or confiscated, the task force commander, Lt. Jim Valentine of the Dallas County sheriff's department, said.

Ewell said, "To veteran lawmen, this is the first organized dog fight they had come across, going back 30 years. From time to time, we have heard rumors of dog fights,

and we have been vigilant to check out those reports, but we never before had this kind of hard evidence of organized dog fights."

The task force was dispatched after being informed that a prize of \$2,500 would be given the owner of the winning dog in the first fight of the night, Ewell said, "and as they go up to the last surviving dogs, the grand finale would be a \$10,000 fight."

As in a cockfight, spectators also bet among themselves on various dogs, Ewell said.

The pit bulldog fight was being staged in a wooded area about 75 yards off Beltline Road, which loops around Dallas, on the outskirts of subdivisions that are sparsely settled, Ewell said.

"There was a frame house sitting 25

yards off Beltline Road," between the suburbs of Mesquite and Seagoville, Ewell said, "and the promoter used an extension cord for an electrical source, stretching the cord 50 yards to a fighting area."

Tarpaulins were stretched over low-hanging tree limbs to conceal the light from the road, and benches and chairs were arranged to form a square around the fighting area, Ewell said.

"The officers, with the assistance of a Dallas police helicopter, moved onto the location, sending a wild bunch of people scattering through the underbrush, hampered by the fact that someone in the house pulled the plug on the extension cord, throwing the area in darkness," Ewell said.

Officers used flashlights and vehicle headlights to illuminate the area, and the

helicopter began shining its brilliant night-light on the scene, he added.

"Several loose pit bulldogs were noticed in the confusion," Ewell said. "The officers also observed several pit bulldogs in cages in backs of pickup trucks and vans."

"Further evidence of an organized dog fight was that they'd set up a concession stand of beer and barbecue, and they found containers of water with sponges as evidence they were going to use that to clean up the bloody dogs."

After the raid, officers reported finding packets of marijuana that they speculated had been emptied out of pockets by people who realized they would be in custody, Ewell said. Several weapons also were found lying around the premises, he said.

Service gives divorced parents 'safe' meeting ground

Child care center offers neutral place to drop off children

DALLAS (AP) — Without fail, at 6 p.m. every first, third and fifth Friday of the month, Bill Turner pulls up in a blue convertible to a house filled with toys and posters proclaiming "Kids Are People, Too."

Waiting inside is his 9-year-old daughter, Jennifer, who was delivered to the place by her mother, Pat, and stepfather, John Curtis, at 5:45 p.m.

Here, on the front porch of an old, two-story house in Oak Lawn, the children of divorced parents wait to be picked up by mothers and fathers who don't want to see, speak or be at the same place within 15 minutes of each other.

"It's better than pulling into my ex-wife's driveway because I could always anticipate something tense happening," says Turner, a salesman for Tel Plus Communications. "We'd exchange a few words. Sometimes it would get nasty and emotional."

says. "Not for me, not for Bill and more importantly, not for Jennifer. Through Kids Xchange, Jennifer has peace of mind and we all can carry on with our own lives."

Ed Rodela, 43, the center's director and a psychologist, says children are often caught in a power struggle between divorcing parents. It was for that reason that 36-year-old Sarah Griego-Rodela, Rodela's second wife, started the Kids Xchange in 1982. Sarah had been having visitation problems with her ex-husband, Rodela explains.

Together the Rodelas have built their service, and added a second in Austin, into an agency that today gets referrals from divorce attorneys and family law judges. More than 200 divorced parents — several who live outside Texas and have to travel to Dallas to pick up a child for a visit — use the service in order to avoid words and fists during the exchange of a child from one ex-spouse to another.

Such confrontations witnessed by a child could lead to psychological problems for the youngster, Rodela says. "A child in such a case could start getting bad grades in school, develop behavioral problems and discipline problems," he says. "I remember a 4-year-old child who developed ulcers, another who had suicidal tendencies and several who became depressed."

Because of the service's growth,

the Rodelas moved Kids Xchange out of their home and into its own headquarters last February. The house has two playrooms to accommodate the 40 youngsters between 18 months and 17 years old who are dropped off and picked up by divorced parents each weekend. In most cases, a child waits for 15 to 20 minutes before a parent arrives.

Kids Xchange also handles court-ordered controlled visits — cases in which the visiting parent is permitted to spend up to four hours with the child, but is not allowed to leave the premises. A kitchen is provided for parents to cook a meal. In supervised visits, a counselor accompanies the parent and child on trips to the zoo, a movie or McDonald's. Fees are \$12 an hour with \$3 tacked on for each additional child. The center also offers counseling to parents and children by one of three trained staff members.

"We're neutral ground for parents who can't get along," Rodela says. "There are no fights on our front porch and no put-downs are

exchanged because our parents don't run into each other. If they do, they ignore each other or say 'Hello' and are on their way."

"Our main concern is always to protect the interests of the child. That's number one. We want to see

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— Bill Turner, divorced parent

the child react to a parent in a very warm, positive way."

Rodela is a former counselor with the Dallas County Family Court Services, which deals with cases involving parental conflicts over child visitation.

Almost all of the children dropped off at Kids Xchange are there because of court orders handed down by judges or attorneys who recommended the services to parents involved in visitation disputes, Rodela says.

Judge Catherine J. Stayman of the 305th District Court says, "It's tragic that the service is essential, but we're living in a day in which there are so many custody arrangements being made between separating or divorcing parents who are in a volatile situation and the child is trapped in the

middle. The nature of the service is one that is very valuable to the court system."

Judge Merrill Hartman of the 303rd Family District Court agrees. He has ordered the use of the Kids Xchange in many cases.

"When the parents are divorced the most frequent occasion to see each other is around the exchange of the children," he says. "If there's a history of violence between the parents and the parents are using the exchange of children to torment each other, then we order them to use the service. It's a very effective remedy. It's sort of like not having a cat and a dog in the same room."

When ordered by the court, Kids Xchange will be used until both parents agree "they've got their anger in control" Hartman says.

Linda Hahn, manager of the county's Family Court Services, an agency that handles evaluations of custody and visitation disputes for the courts, says Kids Xchange keeps parents' tempers cool.

"In one family I worked with, there was extreme physical violence throughout the marriage," Hahn says. "And during the couple's separation, the violence continued."

She says on more than one occasion, when the ex-husband went to his ex-wife's house to pick up his children for a visit, he dragged his ex-wife by her hair out of the house and then beat her on the front lawn

in front of the children.

"The woman feared for her safety if he had any contact with her," Hahn says. "So we set up a situation where he picked up the children from the Kids Xchange. It not only protects the adults, but also the children."

Robert McDermott and his ex-wife mutually agreed three years ago to use the service to exchange their 5-year-old son, Dillon. Since then, McDermott has picked up Dillon every other weekend. Before Kids Xchange, there was inconsistency in visits, he says. There also was a spat or two between the couple, he says.

"Both of us were experiencing bad feelings of the divorce every time we came into contact with each other and that was having an effect on Dillon," says McDermott, national marketing and sales director for Enviro-Med Clinics Inc.

"Using the place to exchange Dillon has been wonderful in that those feelings have been eased," he says. "I like the consistency and the lack of conflict. I can get along with the rest of my life and Dillon feels comfortable."

Rodela says, "When parents outgrow us, then we realize in some way we've helped parents to better understand what a child is going through. We all like to feel we're under control, but sometimes when negative feelings between people are brought up there's always the potential for emotional and physical violence. At least here, that kind of violence is avoided until parents can learn to control their behavior."

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