

Dog day afternoon

The life of an animal control officer

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The four pit bulldogs explode with fury when Erlene Wheeler drives past in her 1997 white Ford pickup. They spew hatred and hit the end of the chains that likely have inspired religion in the neighborhood children, who pray the shackles will hold as they hurry by.

Wheeler is well-known to the canine population of northwest Amarillo, particularly the segment that is prone to slipping the bonds of incarceration for a day -- or night -- of freedom. A chain reaction of crazed barking follows Wheeler's vehicle as she moves slowly through the streets and alleyways.

"They always bark at me," Wheeler said. "They know me in this neighborhood. They see me at least once a day -- sometimes more than that."

She recounts the most recent infractions of her four-legged charges, pointing out each offender as if they're in a police lineup.

The four pits, as she calls them, on Northwest 20th Avenue are a famous gang of troublemakers; two escaped a few nights earlier. It took two officers to capture them. Wheeler herself has a trio of pit bulls, including one she saved from certain death at the animal shelter, so she has no innate fear of the breed.

But even she feels sorry for the neighbors of these four.

"I would hate to live by them," she said.

Wheeler is a short, sturdy woman whose uniform consists of black jeans, black leather boots and a long-sleeved gray officer's shirt with patches on each shoulder identifying her as a city of Amarillo animal control officer. She is further identified by a badge and a name tag pinned to the front of her shirt.

After four years working in the animal shelter kennel, Wheeler switched to field work nine years ago. She has been patrolling the city's northwest quadrant for seven years and requires no map, having long ago mastered the intricacies of the area's streets.

On her utility belt, Wheeler carries a can of pepper spray and a stick, to ward off mean animals, and a walkie-talkie. The other tools of her trade, hanging from a rack on the

rear window of her pickup, include a staff (a long stick with a cable that can be tightened around the animal's neck) and an array of leashes.

Wheeler starts her day at 9 a.m. at the animal shelter, 3501 S. Osage St., the home base for the 11 field officers who patrol the city.

Animal control officers earn a starting salary of \$1,356 a month, which translates into roughly \$8.50 an hour, and through promotion and longevity they can earn up to \$1,821 a month, or about \$12 an hour, said Shannon Barlow, the city's assistant director of animal control. The field supervisors earn more than \$2,000 a month, she said.

Wheeler said the public takes a dim view of animal control officers.

At one point during the day, a warm Wednesday this month, a car waiting in a line of traffic blocked an intersection so Wheeler couldn't cross. Wheeler attributed the other driver's action to the fact that she is an animal control officer.

"People out here don't like me, but that's my job," she said.

The officers deal mostly with dogs, though they've also captured cats, pigs, goats, emu, iguanas and, once, a Bengal tiger that was brought to Amarillo as part of a stripper's traveling show, she said.

The tiger had been left in a room at the Camelot Inn, and it bit a staff member when she entered to clean the room. The animal shelter quarantined the tiger for 45 days, Wheeler said, to check for rabies.

Officers also capture snakes. The nonpoisonous ones are released in the country.

"They eat mice, so they're good to have around," she said.

Rattlesnakes get their heads chopped off with a shovel, she said.

On patrol: 9:15 a.m.

On this particular day, Wheeler drove away from the animal shelter at 9:15 a.m. for the start of a 10-hour shift.

The day was unusual because Wheeler had no calls awaiting her as she left the shelter, so she headed for the San Jacinto neighborhood.

One of the first things Wheeler made clear is that she is not a dogcatcher.

"I hate the word 'dogcatcher,'" she said. "We do a lot more than that."

The officers go to elementary schools to teach youngsters about animals, and they spend much of their time dealing with people who are feuding with their neighbors because of their pets.

"This job is as much about people as it is animals," said Barlow, the city's assistant director of animal control. "It takes some skill."

The point was illustrated with Wheeler's first call of the day. At 9:30 a.m., the dispatcher called to report that a black Labrador retriever had tunneled into a neighbor's back yard in the 1500 block of Fisk Street.

"I'm acquainted with that one," Wheeler said, recalling the dog's name as Bronco.

She had written Bronco's owner a warning citation a week earlier for not having him properly confined.

"The last time I was out here, the neighbor threatened to shoot him (Bronco)," Wheeler said.

Wheeler parked at the curb, and Don Walsh, a man of about 60, opened his front door and led Wheeler to the back yard. There, Bronco was trotting along the fence near the hole he had dug underneath it.

"They just laid two bricks over the hole, but that didn't stop him," Walsh said. "This is the third time."

Bronco jumped up on Wheeler with a friendly greeting, and she looped a leash around his neck and led him to his owner's front door.

A woman in her early 20s answered the knock and seemed surprised to see Wheeler with Bronco. Two children, who had been watching "The Little Mermaid" on television, hid behind the woman's legs and watched the officer.

"I can't deal with this every day," the young woman said, exasperated that Bronco had escaped again. "I'm really irritated."

Wheeler wrote the woman a citation while the dispatcher back at the animal shelter confirmed Bronco's vaccinations were up to date.

Animal control violations carry a fine ranging from \$1 to \$200, but Wheeler said \$50 is typical if the fine is paid within the prescribed 12-day period. Some people plead not guilty and fight the citation in municipal court, and Wheeler is scheduled to testify in such a case that afternoon at 1:30.

The young woman signed the citation, and Wheeler returned to her truck to write up the paperwork. The call consumed 30 minutes.

"I just think they don't give him (Bronco) enough attention, so he's going to try to find it somewhere else," Wheeler said as she drove away. "If she donated Bronco, I'd try to find him a home."

The worst of the job

Like many animal control officers, Wheeler is an animal lover at heart. That's why she got into the business. But about once a week, she endures the worst part of her job.

Every Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, the animal control officers must destroy the unclaimed animals at the shelter. They call it "E-U"-ing -- short for euthanizing -- and they rotate so no one has to kill the animals every day.

Wheeler destroyed 26 animals the previous Friday morning, and five days later it still bothered her, she said. The animals are killed by injecting a concentrated barbiturate into their hearts with a hypodermic needle.

"I'm pretty good at it because I've been doing it so long," Wheeler said.

By "good" Wheeler means accurate and quick.

"It's something that you really need to be good at," Wheeler said. "If you miss their heart and hit their lungs, it's terrible.

"Sometimes, it really gets to me. I want to throw all my stuff down and quit. All of those dogs had an owner. They just don't want to spend their money to take care of them."

The dead animals are disposed of in a large incinerator at the shelter. They are tossed through a small door in the front of the chamber, which must be cleaned regularly to prevent odors. Even looking at the incinerator is unpleasant. A dark brown stain runs down the front, dripping from inside the door.

The officers pick up between 25,000 and 26,000 animals each year, and 13,000 to 15,000 of them are destroyed, Barlow said.

Sometimes, dead animals aren't the worst part of the job. Police once called Wheeler to a home where a man had shot himself in the head while sitting in a chair.

"Everything from his mouth up was gone," she said.

Blood had pooled around the chair, and the dead man's Chihuahua was running frantically around, kicking up blood. Police called in animal control, and Wheeler, on call that night, drew the assignment.

'Make that dog be nice'

The dispatcher's voice came over the radio to inform Wheeler the afternoon's court hearing had been canceled.

But she had another assignment that left Wheeler with a feeling of dread: a Rottweiler, possibly mean, had been reported on the south side of Westgate Mall, running in traffic and scaring people in the parking lot.

"The dog I hate worst of all is a Rottweiler," she said. "They're so big, and if they're mean, it's a bad combination.

"I've never been bitten, and I don't plan on it either, but I'm sure it will happen one of these days."

As she turned the truck toward the mall, she said a little prayer: "Please make that dog be gone. Please make that dog be nice."

"When I get a mean (dog) call, I talk to God all the way there," she said, "and he usually takes care of me."

Wheeling into the mall parking lot at 12:44 p.m., she ventured a guess that the dog had been in the back of a pickup and jumped out while the owner was shopping.

"I hate Rottweilers," she said again.

"They're so big. If you fall down, you've had it.

"Please be gone," she repeated.

She arrived at parking pole No. 37, between Bealls and Mervyn's, where the dog had been reported, but it was nowhere to be found.

"I told you God answers my prayers," she said.

Her field supervisor, John Landry, arrived at the same time to provide backup.

Just then, a mall security guard drove by and motioned for Wheeler to follow. Landry fell in behind her.

The security guard stopped south of the mall, where the parking lot is separated from a nearby residential area by a concrete drainage ditch and a tall wood fence.

"It's a big female Rottweiler," the security guard said. "She's been here most of the morning, and she ran down into this ravine."

A search led Wheeler into the residential area, where she spotted the dog. It was a male, not a female, and it weighed 95 to 100 pounds.

After a long chase through the ditch, a vacant field and the nearby neighborhood, Wheeler managed to get within about 20 feet of the dog. She retrieved a leash from the truck and, in a sweet voice, called the dog and tried to lure him close enough to put a loop over his head.

Landry, meanwhile, sneaked up from behind.

The dog jerked his head suddenly, saw Landry approaching and panicked. He bolted, heading straight for the mall security guard, who hid behind the truck. The dog leaped through the fence, where several pickets were missing, and was off again.

Finally, after an hour, Wheeler and Landry gave up the chase. The dog escaped and last was seen running east along the Interstate 40 access road, but they couldn't find him anywhere.

"If it was me, I wouldn't even try to catch him," the mall security guard offered. "I'd just shoot him."

"No," Wheeler said, "he's somebody's dog. He's got a collar, and he's well-fed."

Two repeat offenders

By late afternoon, Wheeler had taken over the entire western half of the city because the southwest Amarillo officer had finished for the day.

About 4:30 p.m., a call reported two large dogs running loose in the 5700 block of Hampton Street, in a relatively new, upscale subdivision.

When Wheeler pulled up in front of the house, the two dogs raced into the street and barked furiously at her, preventing Wheeler from getting out of the vehicle.

One was a black and white male Siberian husky; the other a white female husky/chow mix, each weighing about 80 pounds. Wheeler called Landry for backup, but moments later, a woman stepped out of the house, blinking into the bright sunshine. She took the dogs inside the house and returned outdoors to talk to Wheeler.

"I just got up and heard them barking," the woman said.

Wheeler asked for her driver's license and the dogs' vaccination records.

"I'm going to give her a ticket because we've been out on these dogs before," Wheeler said when she got back into the truck.

She called the dispatcher to check for prior citations on "Dakota," the female, and "Capone," the names listed on the veterinary records.

The shelter confirmed the pair had been previously cited for getting out of the back yard, and Wheeler began writing two citations -- one for each dog.

Just then, a maroon-colored minivan pulled up behind the city vehicle, and a woman hopped out and walked quickly to Wheeler's window.

"Are you going to pick up those dogs?" she said angrily. "They attacked my daughter, and they dragged the flower pot off my porch."

She pointed to a doormat that the dogs had chewed up and left in tatters. She said the dogs knocked another little girl off her bike.

"I'm getting ready to give them antifreeze," the woman said.

"Don't tell me that," Wheeler said.

"Are you going to pick them up?" the woman said again.

"She's home, so I can't just take them," Wheeler said.

"Will they have to pay another fine?" the woman asked.

"That's what I'm doing here," Wheeler said, indicating the citations she was writing.

After the woman left, Wheeler agreed with her concerns.

"We don't need that" Wheeler said. "Our kids should feel safe to walk down the sidewalk or play ball.

"But we can't say that. We have to hold our tongue."

Wheeler finished the call at 5:20 p.m., and after picking up a female boxer mix at 4320 Gables, she made her way back to the shelter about 6 p.m.

In all, she responded to 17 calls that day, wrote several warning tickets and three citations that will result in fines, and collected one live dog, one live cat, two dead cats, a dead squirrel and a dead dog.

She put the live animals in cages and fed them, then tossed the four dead into the incinerator, which was still glowing from the day's EUs. Then, she stopped for a few minutes to pet some of the dogs, whose lonesome howls echoed through the shelter as darkness fell.

"This is my friend," she said, stopping to pet a male pit bulldog that she picked up at Amarillo College the day before.

After hosing out the back of her truck, Wheeler went into the office to file her paperwork.