

# VAN ZANDT COUNTY HUMANE SOCIETY PRESIDENT ARRESTED AND SUSPECTED OF “PET FLIPPING”

BY BR FITE

VAN ZANDT COUNTY—For most of us, our family dogs are regarded more than mere pets, they are considered a part of the family. The loss of a pet results in the same grief as if we have lost a member of our family. For one Van resident, the nightmare of having his two blue heeler pups stolen led to the discovery of something far more sinister. An investigation into the theft of the pair of dogs led to the president of the Van Zandt County Humane Society being arrested for theft and a warrant being issued for the arrest of a Wisconsin woman, alleging the duo being involved in a scheme called “Pet Flipping”. “Pet Flipping” is not a new pet trick; it is the criminal act of stealing a pet and then selling it as a “rescue” to unsuspecting purchasers. Another variation occurs when a pet has been found and is held at an animal shelter or has been advertised as “found” and the “pet flipper” poses as the pet’s owner only to turn around and sell the pet to someone else. Even worse, the thieves are sometimes “rescues” themselves. Animal thefts also occur around the first of the month, taken and sold at First Monday. Jeremy Housden and his family, of Van, recently fell victim to this illegal activity while out of town, and from the most unlikely of sources—the president of the Van Zandt County Humane Society. Cynthia Durham, 61, allegedly confessed to the offense and has since been taken into custody for the theft of the two 9-month old blue heeler pups, Davi and Pepper, that were given as a present this past Christmas. Housden said that his friend that was caring for Davi and Pepper while he and his family were out of town, and when his friend went to tend to the animals, they were missing. Housden said that another neighbor had seen Durham’s vehicle around his house, and that it was told to him that the neighbor saw the dogs at one moment, and the next they were nowhere in sight, but Durham’s car was still allegedly in the Housden driveway. Housden then said when he contacted Durham about the dogs, something was “fishy”. He promptly contacted the Van Zandt Sheriff’s Office on July 12 and filed a report over the phone. After a couple of days, and seemingly no action being taken, he was not satisfied with the effort of the sheriff’s department, and contacted Van Zandt County Pct. 2 Constable Jesse Ison’s office, who took on the investigation on July 15. Constable Ison’s Sergeant Deputy, Jason Burns, was given the case and quickly learned

information that led to the eventual arrest of Durham. Durham was booked into the Van Zandt County Jail on a warrant for Theft of Property >\$750<\$2500 where she is awaiting arraignment on a recommended bond of \$250,000. In a press statement sent via email exclusively to the Grand Saline Sun by Sgt. Deputy Burns, Ison commented: "Losing a pet is like losing a member of the family. Stealing someone's family pet is absolutely unacceptable. We will not tolerate animal theft or any other crimes being committed against our citizens in this county." The theft appears to be a crime of proximity, as Housden says that Durham lives near his home, and had possibly been plotting the theft prior to actually stealing the dogs. According to the press release, Burns located a photo of the stolen dogs listed for adoption on the "Unchained K-9 Rescue & Rehab" website in Wisconsin. Burns showed Housden the photo and he positively identified the dogs as Pepper and Davi. Burns also discovered that the suspects posted the photo of the stolen dogs on the rescue group's website stating "Available soon." Burns stated in the press release that the photo was posted on the website four days before the dogs were actually stolen from their home. Burns contacted the rescue group and spoke to the owner, Patricia Ann Junk, 53, of Merrillan, Wisconsin, and notified her that she was in possession of stolen property. Junk refused to release the dogs to a law enforcement agency and refused to cooperate with the investigation. After several failed attempts to recover the stolen pets, Ison stated that the Van County Constable's Office had obtained arrest warrants for both Durham and Junk for committing the offense of theft of property. The Constable's Office was still hopeful that the dogs can be located so they can be returned to their family. Burns told the Grand Saline Sun that animals are often stolen down here and shipped up north where they can fetch a much higher asking price. In a phone call Thursday afternoon, Van Zandt County District Attorney Tonda Curry said that she had been in contact with an attorney in Wisconsin that was somehow speaking on the behalf of Junk's rescue organization regarding the accusation levied against her, and said that they were in negotiations to secure the location of Pepper and Davi and their return. In the agreement Curry said they would withdraw the warrant—which would require her extradition to Texas to face charges—while the DA's office was investigating the case. A short time later Thursday, after the press release was issued, Burns called stating that a Jackson County shelter would take possession of the dogs and hold them until they could be transported back to Texas and returned to their rightful owners. He later said that the shelter had notified him that Junk had dropped two blue heelers off with the shelter and had received photo confirmation from the shelter that the dogs in question were Pepper and Davi. Housden said Thursday afternoon that Burns had told him that Pepper and Davi should be home by this weekend since the trip is 18 hours one-way. Housden was very grateful for the efforts of Constable Ison and Sgt. Deputy Burns, and complimented the Pct. 2 Constables office, saying they were "Johnny on

the spot” and that Burns stayed in constant contact with him throughout the whole process. He said that he wanted Durham and Junk to face the consequences of her actions, and prosecuted for stealing his dogs. He said, “I can’t stand a thief!” Ison also stated that it is very important to have your pet’s microchipped. “If your pets get lost or stolen, the microchip will identify the owner so that they can be returned home safely.” Ison stated that the SPCA of Texas has been hosting low cost wellness clinics periodically in Canton. They will be returning September 21, 2019 in front of the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office located at 235 E. Groves Street. The SPCA of Texas will be offering a low-cost wellness clinic including microchips for only \$5.00 to protect your pets. The AKC also offers excellent advice to prevent the theft of your pet, summarized here: • “Don’t let your dog off-leash” • “Don’t leave your dog unattended in your yard” • “Be cautious with information about your dog” to inquiring strangers • “Never leave your dog in an unattended car, even if it’s locked” • “Don’t tie your dog outside a store” • “Protect your dog with microchip identification” • “Immediately report to the police/animal control the theft of your dog” • “If your dog has a microchip, ask to have that unique serial number, along with the dog’s description, posted in the ‘stolen article’ category on the National Crime Information Center” • “Canvass the neighborhood” • Have pictures of your pet available for use on fliers to distribute locally • “Contact the media” As the pet rescue industry continues to expand, pets and their owners may continue to be victimized by thieves looking to make money by flipping pets. The Animal Welfare Act was first passed in 1966, in large part, as described by the Congressional Research Service “to prevent pets from being stolen for sale to research laboratories.” Now, almost 50 years later, it is sad to see criminals abuse the increasingly popular act of “animal rescue” to enrich themselves. The SPCA of Texas investigates animal cruelty in Van Zandt County. If you believe that an animal is being neglected, contact the SPCA of Texas directly at 214-742-7722 or file a report online at [www.sPCA.org](http://www.sPCA.org). In the case of an emergency, contact Van Zandt County Sheriff’s Office at (903)567-4133. The Full Press Release reads as follows: VAN ZANDT COUNTY HUMANE SOCIETY PRESIDENT ARRESTED FOR THEFT Wednesday, August 7, 2019 Van Zandt County Precinct 2 Constable’s Office and the Van Zandt County District Attorney’s Office arrested 61-year old CYNTHIA DIANE DURHAM out of Van for the alleged offense of Theft of Property. Van Zandt County Precinct 2 Constable Jesse Ison stated that on July 15, 2019, the victim, Jeremy Housden, contacted the Constable’s Office requesting assistance with his theft case. On or about July 12, 2019 the victim was out of town and a family friend was caring for their family pets which included two blue heeler dogs. The individual let the dogs outside and when it came time to let them back in, they were missing. Ison stated that during the investigation his Sergeant Deputy Jason Burns received information connecting Durham to the crime scene and the alleged theft. Burns interviewed Cynthia Durham who confessed to stealing the dogs

and that she believed that they were being neglected, which was disproved during the course of the investigation. Burns reported that Durham claimed to be the President of the Van Zandt County Humane Society and their Facebook administrator confirmed this to be true. Durham told Burns that she had transferred the dogs to a rescue group in Wisconsin where they were being prepared for adoption. Burns located a photo of the stolen dogs listed for adoption on the “Unchained K-9 Rescue & Rehab” website in Wisconsin. Burns showed Housden the photo and he positively identified the dogs as his stolen family pets. Burns contacted the rescue group and spoke to the owner, Patricia Junk, and notified her that she was in possession of stolen property. Junk refused to release the dogs to a law enforcement agency and refused to cooperate with the investigation. Burns also discovered that the suspects posted a photo of the stolen dogs on the rescue group’s website stating “Available soon.” Burns stated that the photo was posted on the website four days before the dogs were actually stolen from their home. After several failed attempts to recover the stolen pets, Ison stated that the Van County Constable’s Office had obtained arrest warrants for both Durham and Junk for committing the offense of theft of property. The Constable’s Office is still hopeful that the dogs can be located so they can be returned to their family. Ison commented: “Losing a pet is like losing a member of the family. Stealing someone’s family pet is absolutely unacceptable. We will not tolerate animal theft or any other crimes being committed against our citizens in this county.” The SPCA of Texas investigates animal cruelty in Van Zandt County. If you believe that an animal is being neglected, contact the SPCA of Texas directly at 214-742-7722 or file a report online at [www.sPCA.org](http://www.sPCA.org). In the case of an emergency, contact Van Zandt County Sheriff’s Office at (903)567-4133. Ison also stated that it is very important to have your pet’s microchipped. “If your pets get lost or stolen, the microchip will identify the owner so that they can be returned home safely.” Ison stated that the SPCA of Texas has been hosting low cost wellness clinics periodically in Canton. They will be returning September 21, 2019 in front of the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Office located at 235 E. Groves Street. The SPCA of Texas will be offering a low-cost wellness clinic including microchips for only \$5.00 to protect your pets. Durham was booked into the Van Zandt County for a warrant for Theft of Property >\$750<\$2500 where she is awaiting arraignment on a recommended bond of \$250,000. 53-year old Patricia Ann Junk of Merrillan Wisconsin is currently wanted at large for alleged Theft of Property >\$750<\$2500. The Jackson County Sheriff’s office in Wisconsin is currently searching for Junk and once arrested, she will be extradited back to Texas to face charges.