

Project Saves Lives

Trip from homeless to happiness

By Edward-Isaac Dovere

Until a little more than a decade ago, William Mercer was living on the streets. A crack addict and homeless refugee from his own life, Mercer was the type of man who woke up from a fire that almost burned him alive in the tunnels underneath Grand Central Terminal and checked first for his crack pipe instead of any injuries.

He believes he would probably be dead if not for the standing bench warrant for a parole violation that was discovered after he was arrested for trespassing one night at Penn Station. The presiding judge would only release him

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EDITORIAL

Fares Up, Service Down

East Siders eager to take a Second Avenue subway to work and West Siders more concerned with whether there might be a No. 7 route extension in conjunction with the development near the railyards could agree last week on one thing: subway service stinks.

So even as New Yorkers debate the merits of long-term projects and long-held transportation dreams, we must realize that there are growing problems in the present day. The system needs extensive investment just to keep going. And it needs management that understands that cutting the number of staff members on duty as token clerks is a threat to everyone's safety.

Even as the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) raised fares this year, the bang for the buck seems to be decreasing. "Breakdowns in the subway system

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Your Dog Is Driving Me Crazy

One woman's question: Why do so many New Yorkers treat pets better than people?

► By Elizabeth M. Economou
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ILLUSTRATION BY PHIL MADDEN

Your Dog Is Driving

One woman's question:

Why do so many New Yorkers treat pets better than people?

By Elizabeth M. Economou

A custody battle is being fought in a Long Island courtroom over the fate of Rocky, a one-year-old Chihuahua; Dr. Phil, the nation's top TV shrink, takes his mutt Maggie to work with him; and President Bush's Scottish terrier Barney has his own web site: www.barney.gov. According to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMMA), U.S. pet owners will spend more than \$34 billion on their pets this year alone.

But if Americans are passionate about their pets, New Yorkers have gone dog crazy.

Earlier this month, "The Early Show" on

CBS aired "Canine Cuisine," about how to prepare well-balanced meals for dogs. Like people, we were told, dogs have precise nutritional needs. Then a food pyramid popped on the screen: 10 to 15 percent from fats and oils; 20 to 25 percent from proteins; and 50 to 65 percent from carbohydrates, which includes fruits and vegetables.

If my Greek immigrant father was alive today, he would have rolled his eyes in disgust and changed the channel. As a young boy, he saw his island, Aegina in the Saronic Gulf, fall under Nazi occupation during World War II. An estimated 2,000 people

died from starvation. He and his family sustained themselves on bread, olive oil, and — on a good day — sardines.

What these dog enthusiasts need is a trip to a third-world country where peoples' preoccupation is not what they will eat, but if they will eat at all. This was what I found when I did volunteer work in a village in Ghana, West Africa.

In Manhattan, many dogs live better than people. I didn't understand this seven years ago when I moved here from Seattle, and I still don't. In the Yellow Pages, there are hundreds of listings for dog-related businesses. There are more pages devoted to

dogs than pharmacies, including "Doggie Dearest" in Alphabet City and "Biscuits Bath Doggy Gym" on the Upper East Side. Offerings include "bathing and fluffing," "therapeutic massage," and "holistic care." I guess that's where they treat the whole dog.

I was never crazy about dogs. The only pets I had growing up were tropical fish that I received one Christmas. My sisters and I christened them Oscar and Felix after the TV series "The Odd Couple." My husband George, on the other hand, lived with his pit bull Sparky in Queens for nine years. They were best friends. But even he can't

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Me Crazy

stomach that dogs have more cachet than people.

In November, we moved into a "luxury" pets-allowed apartment building on the Upper East Side. Every morning we wake up to the rabid barking of our neighbor's pesky pooch. This is the same neighbor who leaves her rusty pots and pans in front of her door waiting for maintenance to pick them up. Apparently, she has time to walk her dog every day, but not enough time to carry her trash down the hall.

There seems to be a blatant hubris among many hound owners. I see this on sidewalks, in elevators, pharmacies, and grocery stores. Rarely do dog owners defer to anyone, not even the elderly. They are like drivers of SUVs who hog the road. Walk into any Duane Reade pharmacy. Despite the company strongly discouraging pets of any size, you'll see dogs on long leashes sniffing at candy bars and over the counter medications while oblivious owners flip through celebrity magazines waiting for their prescriptions. At Zitomer, a high-end boutique drug store on Madison Avenue, perfectly

coiffed French poodles prance behind the cosmetic counters.

What really annoys me is when dog owners expect everyone else to share the same enthusiasm, like mothers with newborns. A few days ago while I was waiting in line at a shoe repair, a portly woman in her 50s threw me a steely glare after I had politely asked her to move her dog, who was tugging on the hem of my jeans.

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Many dog owners mistakenly confuse their pets for children. They dress them in Ralph Lauren cashmere sweaters, buy them spa treatments and whitening sessions, and feed them filet mignon for dinner. Because many Manhattanites are opting out of marriage and a family, dogs appear to provide a surrogate family and sense of purpose.

They ought to try making sandwiches for the poor for a change.

Elizabeth M. Economou is an Upper East Sider and freelance writer.



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