

COMMUNITY

Dog park dedicated to founder and his dog

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News-Leader

There's a new name on the Nassau Humane Society dog park at 641 Airport Road in Fernandina Beach: Aurora's Dog Park. Soon there will be a plaque in the park office explaining her story.

Aurora was a dog who had a rough beginning in life and one whose story reflects the mission of the Humane Society. Confiscated by Nassau County animal control in Yulee because of a cruelty/neglect complaint, the Alaskan malamute was in bad shape. She had been used for breeding. Although she was estimated to have been only three years of age, she already had several life threatening conditions: severe mange, heartworm and cancer. She's the kind of dog who might have been put down, even in a "no-kill" shelter, because of her suffering and lack of adoption potential.

Fernandina Beach resident Dave Coyle and his wife were driving by the shelter on Easter weekend and happened to see animal control staff walking the disabled dog outside. Coyle says it was his wife who insisted they go back.

Not only did their adopted dog, Aurora, respond favorably to chemotherapy and aggressive treatment for her other health problems, she thrived under their care. Maybe it was because of her early adversity in life that she turned out to be

an especially "gentle giant," so even tempered that in her later years she served as a hospital therapy dog. She would live with the Coyles for twelve more years.

The Nassau Humane Society was just getting on its feet at the time the Coyles' adopted Aurora. The society wanted to build an animal shelter in Fernandina Beach, but decided to begin with a less ambitious dog park first. A member of the Humane Society Board for 12 years, Coyle was there in the beginning and assumed informal leadership for the fledgling dog park. (If you have ever owned a malamute, you know they are high-energy dogs in need of regular exercise.)

When the city leased the society a parcel of land near the airport, Coyle, his son, and other volunteers cleared the land of brush. According to fellow board member John Landregan, other than the land lease, the Humane Society received no other public or government funding to build the dog park. It was done entirely through private fundraising and donations.

When the park opened in 2009, Coyle became the manager/jack-of-all-trades at the park staffed by volunteers. "(Volunteers) are the best kind of workers to manage," says Coyle, "because they want to be here."

Coyle has lived on Amelia Island for 18 years, since his retirement as a commercial



PHOTOS BY PAMELA BUSHNELL/NEWS-LEADER

Retiring board member Dave Coyle is shown with a plaque commemorating his dog Aurora for whom the dog park is now named.

airline pilot for Piedmont Airlines. He used to fly 727s out of Boston. Since retirement, he enjoys flying his own plane, which he keeps at Fernandina Beach Municipal Airport. In addition to his work with the Humane Society, he has also been a volunteer for the Civil Air Patrol. He and his wife Sally

recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

Retiring once again, this time from active volunteerism, Coyle is leaving the Humane Society board. "We wanted to name the dog park after Dave," says Landregan, "but he is too modest and would have none of it. We finally compromised

on naming it after Aurora." There will be no formal dedication ceremony, also at Coyle's insistence.

The dog park has continued to grow and develop since its inception.

According to board member Ed Hardee, the dog park's amenities ranked it 12th in the nation in 2015 by Coastal Canine magazine based in California. Amenities include separate play areas for large and small dogs, a bone-shaped swimming pool for the big dogs and a landscaped pond for the small ones, benches for human companions, dog bathing facilities and a separate agility/time-out area for training. Bricks and artificial turf have been added to minimize debris and dirt in the pool, but there are also generous natural areas to play fetch and socialize.

Says volunteer Bob Warner, "The park is as much about people socializing as dogs. Folks meet here regularly and friendships develop."

The dog park has been very successful. With an estimated 268 regular members, the facility is now self-supporting and even generates enough money to help support the new Chardonnay Humane Society Shelter next door.

The new shelter, which cost \$2.3 million to build, is already 75 percent paid off thanks to community donations. "The community has been very generous," agrees Pat Smith, board member. The shelter also

serves as the city animal control center for Fernandina Beach. When the Nassau County animal shelter gets crowded, they can also take some overflow.

June 2016 saw a record 95 cat and dog adoptions from the new shelter. A new feature is a video Hardee makes for each animal up for adoption. The result is that people are coming from out-of-state to adopt.

Between the volunteers who staff the dog park, shelter and Second Chance Thrift shop on Fourteenth St and the volunteers who walk and socialize animals in the shelter, the Humane Society has about 400 active volunteers.

"Our next goal is a 24-hour vet clinic to be offered here on site," says Smith. It's on the 3-year strategic plan for the organization.

Visitors to the dog park must provide proof their pet is up-to-date on inoculations and the pet must be spayed or neutered.

For their own safety, no children under 13 are allowed in the park, although children can watch from a shaded porch. Children 13 and up must be accompanied by a guardian. To accommodate the island's many seasonal visitors, visitors can pay \$6 per day or \$35 per month to use the park. The charge is per dog. The park opens daily at 9 a.m. and closes at 7 p.m. during the summer. It is closed for maintenance on Tuesdays.

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Big dogs enjoy a bone-shaped swimming pool at Aurora's Dog Park. The Nassau Humane Society has renamed the dog park on Airport Road "Aurora's Dog Park" in honor of a founding board member's beloved companion.

