

The following article is a detailed account of the Elektra Saluki Rescue, 2005, including eyewitness reports. STOLA is embarking on a education campaign to alert the public to the issue of animal hoarding. Please feel free to download and distribute this information. A pdf link is provided for convenience. If you have questions or would like to make a donation to help with veterinary expenses, please contact STOLA at [stola@gazehound.com](mailto:stola@gazehound.com).

### **Anatomy of a Rescue** **A Detailed Account of the Elektra Saluki Rescue**

For a very long time, most of the Saluki community has been aware of the rescue of a large number of Salukis that took place in Texas in the 1980s. The story has been repeated so often that the facts may have blurred over time, but one fact is clear – the person whose Salukis required rescue was known at the time as Sandy Moss of the Elektra Gazelle Hound Kennels. At that time, there was no legally recognized Saluki rescue group, just people doing rescue out of the goodness of their hearts. These people found a way to help the dogs, but, because of the lack of legal backing, Sandy believed that her dogs had been stolen. In an ad placed in Dog World magazine for Elektra Gazelle Hounds in June, 1995 it states, “Several years ago, Elektra, indeed, the entire breed, lost some of the world’s rarest, most precious, most prestigious and most valuable pedigrees with the theft of many of our Salukis.” Clearly, Sandy believed her dogs had been stolen and she continued to believe this over the years, which soured her on the whole concept of “rescue.” At the time of the event in Texas, for reasons unknown to us, Sandy was not charged with animal cruelty. Sandy had some friends in the Saluki community at that time who helped her to reestablish her kennels by housing her breeding stock. Soon, the Elektra kennels were begun again. While there were rumors that Sandy was mentally ill, what was not known at that time is that one form of this illness is *animal hoarding*, which has since been recognized as a form of *obsessive-compulsive disorder*. (An informative article about Animal Hoarding is being prepared by Lin Hawkyard.)

Animal hoarding is just beginning to be understood and there is an excellent website at Tufts University Veterinary Medical School Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC) at this website address: <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/>. We encourage you to visit this site and learn the signs and effects of animal hoarding. There is much excellent information there. One of the points made about the disease of animal hoarding is that while the hoarder may view themselves as saviors of the animals, they are driven by a need to control. Hoarding is not about saving, it is about power and control- the power to control a helpless creature.

In any event, time passed, Sandy’s Elektra Gazelle Hounds kennels began again and it is reported that she changed her name several times. Some of the aliases she has reportedly used include Sandra Shaw, Sandy Moss, A. Shalmers, Alexander Chalmers, Sandra B. Ferris, Alexandra S.

Benenson, S.D. Berry, Alexandra Shalmers Benenson. It is the name Alexandra Shalmers that came to the attention of STOLA most recently when she was living in Virginia. We often heard rumors that the dogs were starving and living in deplorable conditions. Alarmed, we contacted animal control and asked for an investigation. We were told politely, but firmly, that we needed an eyewitness before anything could be done. Alex still had loyal friends in the community who may not have understood her condition, and therefore felt sorry for her and wished to help her. It is of course understandable to want to help a friend in need, even if the motives may be misguided, because Alex and her dogs were permitted to live in secrecy. We made futile effort after futile effort on behalf of the Elektra Salukis. We contacted Alex Shalmers directly on several occasions, but with her distrust of rescue we could make no inroads. We even offered to send food for the dogs with no strings attached. She replied "Don't ever contact me again!" and slammed the phone down. So now, STOLA was between a rock and a hard place. Efforts to contact the authorities resulted in needing an eyewitness to possible abuse. Alex refused all help. We kept trying with the authorities, but each time we got the same reply - you need an eyewitness. We asked a couple of people who lived in the area to become eyewitnesses but Alex would not allow visits to her home, and the people we asked for help were afraid to put themselves on the line. We received complaints and pleas from the Saluki community to help the dogs but our hands were tied. Without the help of animal control and without the willing participation of Alex Shalmers all we could do was fret about the dogs that were rumored to need help. Then something changed.

Two people new to the Saluki community appeared on the scene, Reba Curtis and Ray Dombkiewicz. At first, we were disappointed because they seemed to be supporting Alex. They acquired two of her Elektra Salukis and seemed to speak in defense of her while making inquiries as to the truth about the Dallas rescue and whether or not the possible abuse continued. But, over time, they came to see the condition of her dogs firsthand - and for the first time in decades finally there were eyewitnesses who were willing to put themselves on the line. Over a period of 17 months Reba and Ray, together with a group of dedicated volunteers, worked behind the scenes, gathering evidence, tracking pedigrees, learning the location of each of the Elektra dogs and see where their progeny were located. More importantly, they were willing to sign a complaint against Alex Shalmers which finally brought Animal Control and legal authorities into the picture. With a formal complaint finally in place, STOLA was able to swing into action, guaranteeing that we would accept and care for any dog who was seized by Animal Control. Through the dedicated efforts of a volunteers who rescued dogs prior to seizure, we were able to get 14 of the Elektra Salukis signed over to STOLA. After serving a search warrant on the Alex Shalmers residence, an additional 25 Salukis were taken into custody as evidence in the animal cruelty case. **(For a detailed view of the steps leading to the Elektra Rescue see the article below: The Elektra Rescue - A Personal View by Ray Dombkiewicz.)**

The condition of the dogs was absolutely heartbreaking! Some were so starved they could not stand. There was blindness in some, there were flea colonies so extreme they looked like coat markings, there were unattended broken bones which had healed badly. Their teeth and gums were in such bad condition that they could only eat soft food. The first thought that ran through

our minds was - how could someone see their own dogs in this condition and not even accept the free food STOLA had offered? But, apparently, animal hoarders see what they want to see, not the reality.

STOLA was immediately thrown a curve when we were told that the Animal Control facility in Brunswick County was very small and very, very underfunded. There was no bedding for the dogs, not enough food and water bowls, insufficient veterinary care, not even enough food. They needed our help to provide even the basics for the Elektras. To supply them with what they needed, we established the Elektra Saluki Aid Fund and immediately began a global campaign to raise a minimum of \$30,000 needed for the veterinary care and feeding of this many dogs in such poor condition. Thanks to the internet and the overwhelming generosity of people from all over the world, we were successful in raising much of the amount needed within 10 days. Donations poured in from the local Saluki community as well as from individuals and dog clubs in England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Canada and South Africa. At that point, we knew the dogs could be held in custody as evidence for up to a year and that feeding them alone could be very expensive. We contacted Pedigree and they generously agreed to donate 20,000 pounds of canned food for the dogs. Flint River Ranch kibble was also donated and soaked in water to make it soft enough for their poor gums and teeth and, mixed with the Pedigree, they gobbled it up and soon began gaining weight.

The dogs were very shy and unsocialized as they were unused to being handled by humans. It seems that contact by Alex Shalmers had been minimal at best. The dogs were not leash trained, they were ungroomed, and fearful of human touch. In spite of the challenges, a group of wonderful people referred to as “groomers” volunteered to work with the dogs at the animal control shelter. Not knowing what they would face in terms of aggressive behavior, it took courageous people and thick leather gloves on the first visits. Fortunately, the dogs proved to be more fearful than aggressive and would often urinate or defecate just on the approach of a person coming toward them. With their numerous rotted teeth, infected gums, tumors, poorly healed injuries and severe underweight condition it was a heartbreaking scene. But work began, first ridding them of flea infestations, getting the mats out of their ears, speaking gently to them, and teaching them that human touch was a positive thing. Gradually, visit by visit, each of them learned to trust and accept the touch of a human hand. Their flea infestations abated, their fur took on a new sheen, and some even began to welcome the groomers’ visits.

While most of the letters STOLA received about the Elektras were very supportive, a few people wrote in suggesting that all the dogs should be euthanized since they were “unadoptable” and “could never really be pets.” We knew that was not true. In the past five years STOLA had already socialized and placed more than 20 Elektra dogs and they all came around beautifully and became loving pets. True, some Elektras remained a little shy, but each went to a loving home where they live very happily with their families and other animals. In most cases it took us more than six months of foster care and training for each Elektra to ensure they were thoroughly socialized prior to placement, but that time was well spent and the outcome excellent. With rare exceptions, most dogs can be socialized given sufficient patience, care and love.

After serving the search warrant on her home and seeing the terrible condition of the dogs, Alex Shalmers was taken into custody and charged with animal cruelty. To protect the evidence in the case we were placed under a “gag order” and were unable to give any but the very broadest details of the case until its completion. Fortunately for the dogs, that day came sooner rather than later. By October 17, 2005 the dogs were released from the animal control shelter into STOLA’s custody. Alex Shalmers had been found guilty of 8 counts of animal cruelty, receiving a suspended sentence of 47 months, the suspended time to remain suspended for a “good behavior” period of 10 years from the entry of the court order.

### **The Court Papers**

Case No. CR050000148-00 thru 148-07  
Virginia Circuit Court of Brunswick County  
Commonwealth of Virginia V. Alexandra Shalmers, Defendant

The court documents state:

*On each of the eight counts of animal cruelty, that Defendant be sentenced to six months in jail. On the first count, five months will be suspended. On the other seven counts, all six months will be suspended. The total time imposed is forty-eight months, with forty-seven months suspended. Defendant will be given credit for time served, including time spent in the psychiatric facility before she was able to post bond. Pursuant to Section 19.2-303.1, the suspended time will remain suspended for a “good behavior” period of ten years from the entry of the sentencing order in this case on the following conditions:*

- 1. The defendant keep the peace, be of good behavior, and not violate any laws of the Commonwealth (of Virginia) or the United States or in any other state or local jurisdiction for the period of suspension.*
- 2. Pay cost of this proceeding as calculated by the Clerk of Court.*
- 3. Successfully complete 12 months of supervised probation with Southside Community Corrections while defendant remains a resident of the Commonwealth. The Probation Officer is given authority to transfer probation within the Commonwealth as the officer deems appropriate. Should defendant provide proof to her probation officer that she no longer resides in the Commonwealth, the requirement of supervised probation will terminate. Defendant will follow probation officer’s instructions in all regards, including any referral for mental health counseling.*
- 4. That defendant agrees to the forfeiture of the 25 dogs seized from her Brunswick County residence on August 8 pursuant to the search warrant.*
- 5. That during the time of supervised probation, defendant shall allow entry of animal control officers at reasonable times to allow for inspection for any companion animals.*
- 6. That defendant agree to never have any companion animal(s) (including but not limited to dogs and cats) and that defendant not reside in any residence with a companion animal.*
- 7. That defendant have no contact, direct or indirect, with the individuals listed on the list*

*attached to the plea agreement.*

8. *That defendant have no contact, direct or indirect, with anyone who will have taken custody of any of the forfeited 25 dogs unless defendant receives written consent from that individual.*

The court papers further state:

*Before agreeing that the foregoing disposition is appropriate, the Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney considered the following factors:*

*a. The Commonwealth is aware of a few aggravating factors in connection with this offense: (1) Defendant - age 60 - is no longer a youthful offender and thus rehabilitation is less of a goal in this agreement than the goal of pure deterrence; (2) the eight dogs charged were in extremely poor condition including for example, flea infestation, severe emaciation, worms, untreated growths, and infections; (3) two dogs received by one of the Commonwealth's informants earlier this year were so neglected that a vet had to euthanize both animals; (4) Defendant was the subject of a similar "rescue" operation in 1988 in Texas; (5) Defendant is demographically and behaviorally consistent with an animal "hoarder" according to the Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC).*

*b. The Commonwealth is aware of at least two mitigating factors with regard to these offenses: (1) Defendant has pleaded guilty; (2) Defendant spent approximately one month in a psychiatric facility after her arrest.*

*c. The Commonwealth is aware of no other pending charges in Brunswick County against this Defendant.*

*d. There were no codefendants on any of these charges.*

*e. No criminal convictions appear on Defendant's record check.*

*f. The trial in this case would take a full day for a bench trial and probably longer for a jury trial. The Commonwealth's witness list would be lengthy and would include at least three veterinarians. Detailing the neglect to each of the dogs on an individual basis would take a significant amount of time.*

*g. Restitution is a relevant consideration in this offense; however, because Defendant is indigent, the Commonwealth is not seeking restitution. The Commonwealth commends the "volunteers" who have donated thousands of dollars to defray the cost to Brunswick County for the vet bills, food, and shelter for the seized dogs. Additionally, money was allocated for a security system for the animal shelter. The security system is currently being installed. The volunteers also donated hours of their personal time to groom the twenty-five seized dogs during the pendency of this case.*

An additional stipulation in the court papers states:

*The Defendant understands that failure to abide by any of the terms of this plea agreement could result in criminal charges for at least another twenty-five dogs.*

With the court proceedings now resolved, and the dogs now in foster care, one might think it is

now time to breathe a sigh of relief - but that time is not here yet. Alex Shalmers is an animal hoarder, a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder. In addition, it is likely that she has been diagnosed with additional mental health problems. Since there is no effective treatment for animal hoarding at this time, it is very likely that Alex Shalmers will try to establish kennels again at some future date, if not in the Saluki breed, then perhaps in some other breed. It is imperative that this never be allowed to happen again. No more animals should have to suffer such neglect and cruelty. For this reason, STOLA is embarking on an information campaign to educate the public to the signs and symptoms of animal hoarding and especially to alert dog clubs in as many breeds as we can possibly reach. We also ask each and every one of you to remain vigilant with regard to Alex Shalmers, not just now, but well into the future. If you know, or even hear, that Alex owns or is living with any animal, please notify STOLA immediately and we will contact the authorities. We wish that Alex could be returned to health and that we would never have to consider this problem again, but we know that is not realistic. Given her age and the lack of effective treatments for the problem of animal hoarding, it is very likely she will be a repeater - unless the Saluki community bands together and decides as a whole that we will not allow this tragedy to happen again. We will be working very hard to prevent a recurrence, but it will also take each and every one of you to help, to listen, to be aware - and to speak out if you know that animals are in danger. From the outpouring of love and generosity of the Saluki community, we know the vast majority of you are caring and concerned people who want only the best for our beloved breed. We are counting on you in the months and years ahead. Help us to make sure this is the very last time that a Saluki rescue of this magnitude will ever be needed.

### **The Elektra Rescue - A Personal View by Ray Dombkiewicz**

#### **In the Beginning: A Time for Discovery and Many Questions March 2004-June 2004**

My wife, Reba, and I first met Alex in March 2004 at the Raleigh shows. She was sitting at ringside with a friend who was showing a bitch bred by her, a beautiful, well-kept, English-looking Tri, dripping in feathering. We made introductions and spent a few moments in idle chatter getting to know each other's backgrounds in the breed. Of course, we had very little to say as our adventure in Salukis was just beginning, whereas Alex had a lifetime of stories to share. We found her to be engaging, very friendly, knowledgeable, and willing to answer all our questions, no matter how many we asked. In fact, Alex seemed like a breath of fresh air compared to some of those stuffy folks you meet who won't give novices the time of day. After a while, Reba expressed interest in acquiring a feathered cream, whereupon Alex offered to show her examples from her kennel. Phone numbers were exchanged.

After that initial encounter we scraped together bits of information about Alex and learned she was Sandy Moss and cause for a Saluki rescue in Texas in the 1980's. We didn't know the extent and horror of that episode and wondered how it could have happened; and if Alex had changed and was now a responsible breeder/owner. After all, she was appearing in public with persons

who owned her dogs, and the dogs appeared to be of good quality. And those other persons spoke very kindly of Alex. What harm could it be to look at her dogs, and if she was still doing wrong, wouldn't it be a good idea to take at least one of her dogs out of that environment and give it a good life?

Arrangements were made to look at her dogs but she would not allow us to visit her kennel. She stated the house had been terribly damaged by the previous year's storms, and she didn't want visitors yet until repairs were finished. While true, we later learned that her house had also deteriorated due to neglect, and the damage caused by years of wear and tear by hundreds of dogs. So Alex came to our house with four dogs. It was hard to choose from among them, for they were underweight, somewhat weathered as if they had been in outdoor kennels their whole lives, and they moved unceasingly and anxiously around our kennel. They were matted with dull coats, and their ear and tail fringes looked like they had been chewed and cut off. None had been trained to obey a master's command, nor were they lead-trained. We spoke with Alex about her reputation and the Dallas rescue. Unconvinced by her side of the story and feeling sorry for the dogs being returned to questionable yards, Reba suggested we had the room and money to take two, thus, at least two would have a better chance at life. We decided on 2 males. Initially unable to catch or control them, we had Alex help us take them to our vet for a complete checkup. The vet took us aside and asked if they had been abused since they looked so malnourished. Other than that one question, the initial evaluation and subsequent test results revealed no problems other than the weight problem and severe worms. We began the task of nurturing our new "boys" and making them part of our household.

However, there were nagging questions that could not be answered to our satisfaction. Why did Alex change her name and move across the country many times? Could she possibly believe that if she resumed her public activities she would not be recognized? What was the real extent of that Texas rescue and what was her reasoning? Why didn't she allow us to see her kennel and how many dogs did she really have and were they in the same condition as our two, or worse? In those first four months of our association with Alex, we began an intensive investigation of her past history as well as her present conditions. We wanted to know what kind of person we were really dealing with, and if she was causing harm to any dogs. The difficulty was how to get at the real truth.

At that time we didn't have direct contact with those involved with the Texas rescue, and didn't know many folks in the Saluki community. Almost all of those who learned of our involvement with Alex immediately took the low road with us, as the passage of time did not soften their horrible memories, and our inquiries were often met with extreme emotion and hostility. So, sifting fact from hearsay was difficult, and much info was second hand anyway, as we were unable to reach the actual rescuers. However, the Saluki community was very concerned that another rescue was inevitable, and previous attempts to get Alex to stop had failed. But the aftermath of the Texas rescue began to emerge. I say aftermath, because even now, the events leading up to the Dallas rescue are still debated, that is, could it have been foreseen and prevented; and further, it was a private rescue, that is, without legal involvement, and Saluki

rescue did not yet exist. Many records from that time are now lost. Memory fades, and facts get distorted or embellished.

One fact was clear and without dispute: many Salukis suffered and died a horrible death, and this weighed heavily on our minds. In no way did we want to encourage Alex to breed and recreate the conditions that led to the earlier rescue. Alex's answers to our inquiries were generally evasive, contradictory, and occasionally hard to believe. Getting nowhere with our initial approaches and inquiries, we made a pact between us in July 2004: we were determined that no matter how bad it got, we would maintain contact with Alex to the end, find out exactly how she cared for her dogs, get her to stop breeding, and find homes for her dogs if they were in excessive numbers and/or not treated properly. We felt strongly there was a possibility that dogs were suffering routinely from the time of the Dallas rescue until present and that was unacceptable. We didn't know exactly how to achieve these goals, as many previous attempts by more experienced Saluki folks failed, and there were numerous legal hurdles to overcome. We also didn't know the extent of her mental illness, which was revealed in subtle ways over the ensuing months. Intuitively, we believed that the direct, forceful approaches used by others in the past would not work as Alex was distrustful of anyone in Salukis and Saluki rescue; but that she encouraged relationships with new people like us, or people who did not challenge her, and people who valued her dogs and her 30-year breeding program. That was the hook that enabled us to play out the strategies that eventually led to the current rescue, plus our growing understanding of her needs and wants. We felt that if we could gain her trust, and learn what drove her to make decisions, we could eventually persuade her to give up the dogs.

### **The First Steps: Building Trust Amidst Many Setbacks; Gathering Facts; Developing Strategies, July 2004-December 2004**

Our relationship with Alex met its first test when we left one of the boys in our bedroom for a few minutes with Reba's heart-dog, Baby, a four-pound rescued toy Yorkie, which was found dead. No one actually saw the attack, and there was no evidence of puncture marks or blood. The Saluki was on the bed beside Baby when Baby was discovered. There was no prior incidence that led us to believe that such an attack would occur. The second test occurred when the other Saluki mauled our twelve-pound Yorkie, Attila, who had to be rushed to the emergency room. I will never forget the Salukis' cream muzzle covered in blood. We hadn't yet discovered that Alex let her dogs run in packs in and out of her house, and that when the kibble ran out, they ate rats and caught whatever prey that made the unfortunate journey across her yards. She never cautioned us against having other small pets in the house. Unable to find another immediate home and unwilling to euthanize, we decided to return the dogs to Alex with an agreement to find new homes as soon as possible and stay in contact regarding their care. It was hard not to walk away at that point. I was unable to comfort Reba as she grieved for the loss of Baby and cried uncontrollably for days. Through her tears, Reba said it wasn't the Salukis' fault, it was their nature and unfortunate life with Alex, putting them down wouldn't bring Baby back, Baby's death was meant to be, and Baby will be at peace when all the suffering dogs in Alex's yard were released. I have to admit that Reba exhibited much forbearance with Alex when we returned the

dogs. However, this helped solidify the relationship, as Alex seemed genuinely concerned with our welfare and the Yorkies, and wanted to help in anyway she could.

Another factor that helped build trust between us was our mutual interest in pedigrees and Saluki history. Reba and Alex worked hand in hand to put Alex's dogs in Paw Village, an on-line pedigree builder, and over many months there were extended phone calls and e-mails. Bit by bit we learned that she had as many as 70-80 dogs on site during 2003, and our worse fears were confirmed: that she had little control of the dogs, they were not routinely fed, they did not receive vet care, that accidental breedings were not uncommon, they lacked sufficient cover from the extremes of heat and cold, and that her family home situation was worsening and financial resources tight. As of December 2004, there were approximately 51 dogs on site as best as we could determine. However, we were still unable to inspect Alex's home and verify the dogs' conditions.

On a personal basis, we found Alex to be quite charming, sociable, and worldly in her sane moments. She has an in-depth command of topics that have been a lifelong passion, such as dogs, southern traditions, customs, and manners, classic history, fine art and antiques, and highly developed epicurean tastes. The best way I could describe her appearance is one of faded, southern gentility. In character, despite all later events, we feel she has a deep but misguided love and concern for her dogs; and a very strong desire to love and be loved. While there are too many examples to illustrate in a short article, I will say that she appeared to live in the past and the future-that is, she bears an obsession to recapture the past glory of her life and dogs prior to the Texas rescue without realizing that in her present state, such goals could never be achieved; and she dreams of her future, the way things should have been. Later on, when we received a call from Alex in the mental institution, she told us they found her bipolar and paranoid. On occasion she would take some of her dogs to local shows, and everyone could see their ragged and unhealthy condition, let alone their lack of socialization and inability to be shown properly. Alex didn't see it, or when pointed out, she was quick with justifications and rationalizations. Whether she is delusional or driven to mask all sense of reality for the sake of her dogs is not for us to judge, but as events unfolded, we came to realize that Alex was out of touch with reality in every single facet of her life. Some examples follow.

A typical week in Alex's life was heartbreaking and stressful and rendered many a sleepless night for one or both of us. Every plan or agreement was met with reason then changed by the next day. Alex would worry Reba about no food for her dogs, describe horrific illnesses and conditions, or show fears that someone was breaking in her house or cutting off the dogs' ear fringes. Every event was magnified by Alex's fears and emotions and she was usually helpless to make decisions or carry out actions. She would call sounding out of breath many times. Why? Because she had just finished scooping the morning's dead rats caught by the Salukis during the night and taken them out to the trash; or because the rats were lodged in her pipes and she had no running water and she had just finished carrying heavy buckets of water to her kennels so the dogs could drink; or because she just broke up a dog fight; or because she just shooed the local teenagers away from the fence edges for taunting her dogs.

She called throughout the day, every day, to talk about her moment-to-moment problems or fears. She was hungry but couldn't fix anything to eat because she had no food for the dogs and if they smelled her cooking she would not be able to control them. She was terrified because she found a leaf in her hallway. It was a sign that STOLA would get all her dogs, one by one. "Didn't we understand," she screamed. "STOLA is the Tree of Life and someone had planted a leaf to warn me that they would take my dogs." Or, "Do you know how STOLA got its name? They stole my dogs in Texas." (Note: STOLA was not founded until the year 2000, approximately 12 years after the Texas rescue which took place in 1988.) Such episodes of paranoia would cause major setbacks and withdrawals. Each week that went by was the same, with only slightly different examples.

Another side of Alex revealed intense self-importance and need to appear intelligent, classy and rich while in public. She would dress in expensive designer clothes, even if faded from age and stains, and her signature piece of clothing was a full length mink coat which she would wear well into warm weather and well before onset of winter. She had an obsession for designer pocketbooks and shoes and would spend thousands on each. Where did she get the money? How could she spend \$2,000 on a pair of shoes and not feed herself or her dogs? We never got the answer, although Reba asked Alex many times over. She was also a collector of fine dinnerware, silver and crystal. Through the years she collected table settings one by one, spoon by spoon. Once her table was set, it looked like something out of a magazine, fit to serve royalty. She cherished these belongings and would not sell a single item for her benefit or the dogs. It seemed strange to accumulate so many expensive dining and entertaining objects, yet never entertain. At times she would fully dress in evening wear, with makeup, manicured nails and styled hair. Then she would set her table, light the candelabras, pour wine in a \$500 crystal glass and dine. She dined alone and drank alone.

What mood or events would occur with the next phone call? Was she happily planning another tea party, was she paranoid that people were breaking in her house or cutting her dogs fringes, was she begging for food for her dogs, was she relating a story of dogs dying at her feet, or was she bragging about her new outfit she wanted to wear at the next outing.? Our research into animal hoarding on the HARC website confirmed some of our worse fears: it seemed that Alex fit the mold in all respects. Something had to be done, but what?

### **Hard Times in Winter: January 2005-March 2005**

Events escalated last winter, which made us more concerned about the dogs. Her "husband" left her and gave her a small monthly income to handle affairs, not enough to cover all expenses. She routinely did not have enough money for food for herself or her dogs. The utilities fell into disrepair and Alex could not afford to fix them. We learned that the house was heavily infested with rats, which ate through the electric wires. She lived without heat or air and running water throughout the majority of her house. She slept in the frigid cold completely dressed with a coat on, while the "upstairs" Salukis kept her from being bitten by the rats. Because of the untenable

living conditions we pleaded with Alex to get her life in order: find safe homes for the dogs and learn to help herself and get a job. She was incapable of solving her problems and felt she was doing the best she could to keep her dogs alive, often doing without food herself to feed them. But we couldn't force any decisions because we feared that Alex would close the doors on us; we had to let Alex believe she was making all the right moves and those moves were her decisions.

Two events during this time took their toll on our patience and made us more determined and desperate for immediate actions. One of her bitches had puppies during the dead of the winter. All but two died during birth. The bitch, likely frantic from neglect and lack of nutrition, rejected the pups. Alex insisted she had to put the puppies with the mother for heat as there was no heat in the house. The mother attacked one of the puppies furiously. With the puppy screaming in her arms Alex called one of the volunteers who had taken one of her dogs and asked frantically what she could do. The volunteer was in a panic as she listened to the puppy scream but tried to counsel Alex. It was no wonder that this volunteer lost her heart to help anymore. The puppy died in Alex's arms and during the night, the other puppy froze to death. The next event, Alex called Reba to tell her that one of her dogs had collapsed in her yard, its tongue hanging out, and was heavily panting. She was trying to squeeze water from a rag onto its tongue. Reba tried to get her to wet towels and soak the dog in cold water, but Alex had no running water. Reba urged Alex to take the dog to the vet. Alex had no money and had estranged all the vets in her local area with lack of payments. Desperate, she finally called a local vet who at first refused to see her. Alex begged. She took the dog to the vet who euthanized it in the back seat of her car. This enraged Alex as she believed that she and her dog were not even good enough to enter the vet's office. Alex drove home with the body in her back seat and called again because she couldn't figure out how to dispose of it. The ground was too hard to dig, she exclaimed. Finally, she bagged the poor dog and threw it in the dump. Even Alex, through tears, said that she now had hit rock bottom.

All of a sudden, she finally agreed to start placing her dogs swiftly and in groups and asked if we knew of persons who might take them. Of course, take them with breeding as a requirement. Our first choice was an experienced saluki breeder/owner living on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, who gladly agreed to help. It took a lot of time and patience to get Alex to trust another person, particularly with a background in Salukis, but it was finally agreed that we could visit the house and let this volunteer look at the dogs and make selections. Between March and May of 2005 we visited the household three times, and saw the real extent of the damage to humans, dogs, and the house. It is hard to describe the filth and stench we encountered and retain control of our emotions. The volunteer helped by contributing food and money to Alex while trying to negotiate transfers with papers, and spent hours and hours a day supporting Alex on the phone along with Reba. We also made inquiries to others on the outside chance that they would take some dogs. No one came forth. Since Alex was convinced that her line must be preserved at all cost, she made stipulations in regard to breeding and co-ownership, and would not provide unconditional releases. Our first strategy was to create a team of intermediaries that would take her dogs out under agreed upon terms and then transfer them to STOLA. Alex would have none of it, but we kept bearing down almost on a daily basis. STOLA was able to take the dogs only if legal

transfers could be accomplished, and they began preparing for foster homes, permanent homes, food, and vet care in anticipation of getting releases. Negotiations between Alex and the volunteer stalemated.

### **Springtime Accomplishes Little: April 2005-June 2005**

Winter turned to spring and a tremendous, prolonged heat wave developed in southern Virginia. Alex was without air conditioning, and the house temps rose to over 100 degrees on a daily basis. Once, on a phone call to Reba, a distraught Alex dropped the receiver to one of her dogs to let Reba hear the dog's heavy panting, for it was overheated and without water, and she desperately expressed an urgent need for help. Over this time four dogs had to be put down—one for heat stroke, an accidental injury, and two others for untreated medical conditions. Reba and the new “phone” volunteer helped Alex through the process. Luckily, a number of fortunate dogs were released to persons other than our volunteer, so by June our estimate of dogs on hand was about 41. This estimate also accounted for dogs that died.

Also during this time, up through June, we made repeated attempts to contact Animal Control and the County Sheriff's Department, and their outside inspections failed to come up with any adverse conditions. The problem was that Animal Control's only measure that would cause action was that the dogs had food and water, and they had little. They didn't inspect the inside for they needed a warrant to do so, and they didn't believe that the “outside” dogs were in harms way despite their underweight appearances. Animal Control offered Alex food and water and flea and tick medications on many occasions. Alex refused, always acting like she was providing everything and needed nothing. We were getting very anxious at this point because we feared that the heat wave would extend into the summer months and the dogs were slowly being starved to death and tortured with untreated medical conditions. All attempts to get Alex to voluntarily relinquish control of her dogs failed, and her paranoia and fears mounted. She knew that her dogs needed help but she was unable to give up control. All we could think of was how these dogs were suffering and we couldn't help them. It became a 24/7 obsession with us to get the dogs out. The effort began to take a toll on Reba's health. The days and weeks continued to pass without resolution as plan after plan failed. Alex's life was monitored on a daily basis by volunteers posing as friends and admirers of her dogs; and all such volunteers remained in direct communication with Reba so that new ideas could be discussed and acted upon. We expanded our inquiries to local government agencies such as Social Services, and Health Services, hoping they would examine the house and get it condemned, and remove Alex due to her indigence. These agencies offered little help. It was difficult to match Alex's infractions to the rules of these organizations. To Animal Control, she had food and water; our laws protect our homes against unwarranted entry; STOLA, not having the authority to seize dogs, needed legally signed transfers which Alex was unwilling to provide; Social Services requires a person to voluntarily seek their services; AKC deals with registering dogs, not solving abuse cases; and the Health Department allowed one to live in horrific conditions with rats and no utilities as long as these conditions did not affect outsiders.

During this time, we continued our research into Alex's dog histories and pedigrees in Paw

Village-identifying co breeders and owners; and further, having collected Alex's personal records, breeding books, AKC registrations, AVID certificates, vaccination records, etc., we developed an accurate accounting for all her dogs. A new volunteer took on the burden of verifying and organizing all the massive paper work for every litter in the life of Elektra, accounting for every dog within each litter, down to the stillborn, and every death. The process was meticulously documented and took months of research. Once this information was matched against every record, we felt assured that we knew the whereabouts of all of Alex's dogs. As the information was charted, Reba contacted owners of the past and present and explained the situation. This process assured that history would not repeat itself as far as Alex having enablers, hiding dogs, or getting dogs back. We knew where every dog was, we knew their owners. We knew that she had alienated every past acquaintance and that all present affiliations were our own people, helping to end the vicious cycle of abuse. The documentation effort then became valuable at the time of seizure as we were able to identify each and every dog that Animal Control confiscated.

### **Everything Comes Together: July and August 2005**

In early July, Alex rushed to our home in Maryland with pleas to take two of her dogs to the vet for she feared the worse. When we got to the vet, I carried in the dogs which felt like featherweights, both weighing less than 34 pounds. Even now, I still think about them, looking into their faces watching the fleas crawl about; and their weary, sad, and begging eyes, as if they knew the end was near and they could rest in peace. Another excruciating decision, the dogs, with the vet's recommendation, had to be put down. We became more desperate and felt each day was precious to the lives of the remaining Salukis; and feared that Alex, left to her own devices, would wind up with all the dogs dead. Our strategies became more complex and intense, with no guarantees of success. We felt we now had enough evidence to accuse Alex of animal abuse, and understanding the legal risks implied in such an accusation, I immediately compiled a case with photos, matching all conditions as we knew them to specific Virginia State Animal Abuse Code, and then filed a 100 page brief to the State Vet's Office and other county and state governmental entities within Virginia, and to the AKC. We also contacted the local and national arms of any animal humane societies we could think of. It was my job to follow up with these state entities to get them to inspect the premises with a warrant and indict her on animal abuse charges; to get the AKC to inspect her kennel and strip her of her rights; and to encourage these other nonprofit animal organizations to support us. Needless to say, these entities were slow to respond or failed to respond, including the AKC. But we kept pushing each day, hoping something would break open. We began preparing briefs to deliver to the Governor's Office, targeted elected officials, and the press. It was Reba's job to still find volunteers agreeable to Alex that would take her dogs, now posing as "breeders" to save them, until such time that these involuntary actions took place. Reba also offered Alex an opportunity to turn over all her sick and worse dogs to her, that Reba would pay the vet bills and take care of them until they were healthy and then find homes for them, thus bypassing the people who would condemn Alex for the condition of her dogs. Alex agreed to transfer some of her dogs to Reba. Alex then changed her mind the next day because she feared they wouldn't be bred.

Luckily, Reba then found two persons who committed under these tense conditions to work with Alex and take some of the dogs. It was no surprise that Alex took to these persons just as she had to us many months ago. They were willing to take her dogs under any terms, and in any condition, without judgment, and they did not have a history of Alex's past from which to judge her, or at least that was what Alex was led to believe. Alex became insistent that they take a number of her dogs over a two-week period, without regard to any burden the dogs imposed on these folks. Alex was desperate to find homes for her dogs because of their severe conditions, the onset of summer and ticks and fleas, and her lack of ability to find a financial means to care of them. And yet, she still could not relinquish them to just anyone, to people who would not breed them, nor to STOLA or others who would spay and neuter them and therefore extinguish her lines. Transferring the dogs was becoming a burden because of the dogs' severe conditions and sheer numbers. The carefully worded "breeder" transfers would allow the volunteers to transfer the dogs to STOLA who could then reimburse for temporary care and arrange for eventual transfer to foster homes. However, we were warned by authorities that in our efforts to help we may be hurting ourselves as every time we took a group of dogs out, evidence was being lost. If authorities could position themselves to do a full investigation and Alex's numbers were then controllable and she had saved her best dogs, there would be nothing the authorities would be able to do. Reluctantly, we had to call off the volunteer "breeding" ruse. Meanwhile, the volunteers unknowingly had taken out additional dogs for a grand total of 14 dogs removed from Alex's home. All parties were initially disappointed that more dogs were rescued as we were changing to a new plan to leave as many on Alex's property as possible at this point so there would be evidence when authorities came in. This last effort left 25 dogs on site.

At the same time, many parties that received the brief decided that the abuse was "criminal" and our evidence would have to be submitted to the District Attorney for formal abuse charges. The Virginia State Assistant District Attorney in Brunswick County, William Blaine, finally accepted the case but could not be granted a search warrant unless it dealt with eye witness accounts or events within 72 hours of issuing the warrant. We thought all was lost until we could scheme another visit to Alex's house. Maybe it was luck, or the DA's persistence, or Alex's driven and irrational behavior, but the last 5 transfers that Alex pushed on these new folks, the last ones they would accept, happened to fall within that 72-hour timeframe. The volunteers took pictures and described conditions of the dogs removed within the last 72-hours to the DA. It was enough for the DA to get the judge to issue the warrant. Within a short time thereafter, in August 2005, seventeen months from when we first met Alex, we received the call that Alex had been shackled in chains and sent to jail and her dogs confiscated. In October the court issued its decree and the order was then appealed at the Circuit Court level with the same outcome. It is important to understand that at the Circuit Court level, the record remains forever on the books. The final judgment is detailed elsewhere, and Alex was released to resume her life after dogs. We were also informed by AKC General Counsel that inspections had commenced in August.

Perhaps the following anecdote may sum up the complexity that is Alexandra Shalmers/Sandy Moss: When we got that call from Alex in the mental health institution, after all she had been through, she complained how the sheriff's office was screwing things up and didn't have

anything right. “What do you mean,” Reba asked worriedly, thinking that Alex might have found some loophole, and would get out. “Well,” exclaimed Alex, “when they weighed me on the scale they said I weighed 110 pounds.” “So?” “They still had me in shackles. I really weighed 105 pounds. Hah!” What can you say to that?

Reba was allowed to interview Animal Control officials, so the following may be of interest. Also, I summarized pieces of our last conversation with Alex.

### **The Seizure and Morning After: August 8th and 9th**

While the volunteers took pictures and submitted evidence to the Assistant District Attorney, I followed up on the complaint with AKC officials in Raleigh and New York, (copies of my legal brief had been sent to the Board Chair, President, General Counsel, and Director of Inspections and Investigations). As previously stated, weeks went by without a response. On Thursday, August 4th I spoke with AKC officials in their Raleigh HQ. AKC was not prepared to position themselves as “abuse detectives”, and Alex wasn’t on their schedule of inspections as they had no indication of multiple litters. They had no plans to take action. Furious with such a response, I called the AKC General Counsel in New York. After back and forth heated discussions, wherein I cited AKC’s abuse rules and regulations and threatened public exposure related to PAWS (since they wanted the abuse and inspection contract under the proposed legislation), the General Counsel promised that an inspection would incur within 24 hours. It was confirmed that they sent an official that Friday.

On Monday, August 8th at 9:00 AM the Brunswick County Sheriff served the warrants. Two police cars with three officers and Animal Control officials drove up to Alex’s house. The Sheriff served the warrants. The Animal Control warden told Alex she had no choice this time and demanded entry. Alex produced rabies certificates, food and water. She did not understand why they were going to arrest her when all her papers were in order. When she realized the inevitable, she just asked to put on clothes and went quietly, shackled, to the police car. She asked if she could assist the officers to collect her dogs but they refused. As soon as I received notification of her arrest I informed the AKC General Counsel. Reba notified STOLA and all other organizations and began her intense relationship to support the evidence in preparation for court with Gerry Vincent the County Administrator and William Blaine the Assistant Attorney General. Throughout the day during the capture of the dogs, social workers, the State Vet, and AKC officials appeared on the premises. The State Vet examined the dogs and sent six of them to the vet immediately stating he thought 20 out of the 25 were in bad condition, 3 borderline and only 2 OK. AKC scanned the dogs for microchips and documented their findings. We later received a letter from the AKC Director of Inspections that based on the field reports, an official review had commenced which would remain confidential.

In an interview with Reba, Animal Control personnel described Alex’s home conditions as horrendous, the worse they have ever seen. The grass around the house and yards had grown over 4 feet tall. When they entered the house, the first thing they saw were dog bowls filled with

kibble, but no dogs were eating. Rats the size of squirrels were eating out of the dog bowls. They looked up as if to acknowledge their guests and went back to eating, only moving when finished eating to let another one in. The officers commented about the rats to Alex who at first said she didn't have any rats, and when they showed her the evidence she said all the people in the country have "some" rats. The house was filthy, barren of any food, and the kitchen was cluttered by objects, filth, and broken appliances with no sign of use in quite a long time. They referred to it as "horrific, hell's kitchen". Some of the dogs were outside in one of her fenced yards and others were in various rooms in the house. Some could not stand or walk. They further observed the condition of her house. Although the walls and flooring throughout the house showed signs of dog excretions, all but one room had been picked up. They had to look for sick or dead dogs in every part of the house. They opened cabinets, empty of food, but lined with 2 inches of rat feces. There was no running water on the first floor as the rats lived in the pipes and could be heard scattering through the walls. The toilet, unable to function without water, was filled with human feces, forming a mound. The only room in somewhat of an acceptable condition was her bedroom. Every other room showed the neglect of time, dogs, roaches, rats, weather and water damage. One social worker was sick to her stomach and refused to inspect the house beyond the foyer.

They decided to let all the dogs that could walk go out into the yard to catch them. Afterwards, the Warden said it would have been easier to let Alex help catch them or to have caught them while in the house. At the time, they thought it would be easier in the yard away from the filth and clutter. It took them all day, into the night to finally catch them all and close the last kennel door at Animal Control. They chased them from one corner of the yard to another and back again, catching them with catch poles, unaware they could not be led out on lead or obey basic commands. They report that they jumped and flew through the high grasses, peeking out over the top, looking like deer, quite majestic at times. The officers stressed they were as gentle as possible. Only one dog was hurt as the chase reopened an old wound that had not healed.

When asked what the officers found most memorable one states Alex's attitude. She told the officer, "I have rare blood lines, those people just want my dogs." The other officer was shocked at the filth and smells the dogs created once at Animal Control. He said he could not describe the mess these sick dogs created with vomit, diarrhea, worms, blood from open sores, flea excretions, and mud. The first morning of cleanup was shocking.

### **The Incarceration: August 2005**

Soon after Alex was arrested she was transferred to a mental health institution for evaluation. She called Reba from the hospital. At first she demanded to know who did this to her and where her dogs were. When she realized Reba wasn't going to answer, she responded to a few questions. She didn't have any money for coffee, she didn't have any clothes, she didn't have any makeup, and she had to go to bed without her creams. They arrested her and put shackles on her in front of all her neighbors. She complained by 3:00 am she was still in shackles and they wouldn't let her go to bed. She decided to change her cooperative nature which she thought

would get her out sooner and refuse to follow directions of the officers until they let her go to bed. The officers asked her to get on the weight scale. She refused. They picked her up and placed her on the scale. As written, she was weighed incorrectly in shackles.

She stated that they had presented her with a paper to sign herself into the hospital and she refused to sign it. They called her "husband" who also refused to sign. She read from the paper that they were diagnosing her as bipolar and paranoid, and some "stupid" lady wanted to add delusional but she set her straight. She explained, "I told her I was worried about my diamond ring and mink coat because my house was abandoned and people could steal them." According to Alex, the woman kept looking in her folder and asked Alex why she thought she had a mink coat as if Alex did not and never did. Alex was frantic as she was unable to convince the woman she really did have a mink coat and everything she said made it worse and the woman told her she was delusional. The woman then wrote in her folder and Alex could see that she was looking at pictures of her house she suspected were taken during the seizure. The woman was in the courtroom soon after with Alex, and the Judge asked Alex about the mink coat. Alex then proceeded to interrogate the Judge, saying, in short, "Well Judge, doesn't your wife have a diamond ring and a nice coat and wouldn't you be worried if they were left in your unattended house? I rest my case." "Couldn't they understand that I just wanted my mink coat?" It was the last time we would hear from her.

### **Summary Thoughts**

Is there any hope that Alex will ever be able to deal with the reality of her situation and the loss of her dogs? I really don't know if she will ever change her behavioral patterns. The empirical research on animal hoarding suggests that she won't. In our minds she needs a good dose of mental health counseling and watching by the dog community. We don't know how she will act a few months or years down the road. Certainly she must be approached in ways that are not counterproductive, and those that she approaches must be on guard. Hopefully, the legal remedies now in place will make it far less difficult to report on Alex's movements and activities. Unlike the 1980's, the Saluki community now has the ability to foresee and prevent yet another rescue, if we all commit to vigilance and act in concert. We now have the law on our side. By working together we can prevent this from happening again. We must.

Any questions should be directed to STOLA at [stola@gazehound.com](mailto:stola@gazehound.com).



Alexandra Shalmers aka Sandy Moss with one of her dogs in better times.



One of the Elektra Salukis seized in the 2005 rescue.