



Victor Marino (in his old New Orleans neighborhood) got Max (right, and below, with Mansfields) as a present from his brother in 2002: "He was my best friend."

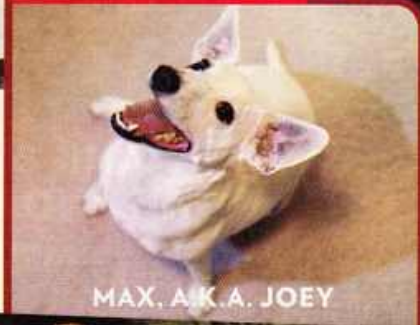
WHOSE DOG IS IT ANYWAY?

Thousands of pets lost during Katrina found new homes—but now some former owners want them back

As Hurricane Katrina charged toward Victor Marino's home in St. Bernard Parish, La., last Aug. 28, he frantically called hotels to find a haven for his dogs, Max and Sinatra. When those efforts failed, Marino—who had an offer to stay with a friend in Baton Rouge who didn't have room for dogs—filled five-gallon jugs with water and food and knelt down to bid farewell to his Jack Russell terrier and German Shepherd mix. "I said, 'Be brave, I love you,'" Marino, 27, recalls, his voice breaking, "I'll see you soon."

Or so Marino, an electrician, thought. Returning to a wrecked home 10 days later, he spotted muddy paw prints leading out a second-story window—and, hoping the dogs had swum to safety, spent four months calling pet-rescue agencies and searching Web sites. In January he learned Max had been taken in by the Humane Society of Pinellas, Inc., in Clearwater, Fla. Then came the stunner: Max had been adopted by Tiffany and Jeremy Mansfield of

DOG GONE



MAX, A.K.A. JOEY



The Humane Society "asked if I'd be willing to turn Joey over, and I said, 'No!'" says Tiffany Mansfield, with husband Jeremy in Clearwater, Fla.

Steve and Dorreen Couture with grandchildren Steven Jr. and Cassidy (in their wrecked New Orleans home) got the dogs as pups in 2001.

MASTER TANK & NILA, A.K.A. NOAH AND GRACIE

"He's an angel," says Pamela Bondi (in Tampa) of the Saint Bernard she has named Noah.



Rineker (at her Dunedin, Fla., home) says the dog, called Gracie, is "very protective."



Clearwater in December. Marino called and asked for his dog back—even offering to get the couple a new one. But the Mansfields—who call the pooch Joey—say they plan to keep him. "What happened to Victor is awful," says Tiffany, 22, who got the pet from Jeremy as a Christmas gift. "But I simply don't know what I'd do without this little

dog." Marino is working with a lawyer: "Emotionally," he says, "this has taken a huge toll on me."

The battle over Max-Joey is one example of a little-known but painful pet drama unfolding a year after Katrina: Some owners, forced to leave their dogs behind, now are filing civil suits to reclaim some of the 7,000 pets adopted by people who thought they

were saving an animal abandoned during the hurricane. In the months after the storm, rescuers posted photos of animals online at sites like petfinder.com, and left notes on flooded homes saying the animals had been taken to emergency shelters such as Camp Lucky in St. Bernard Parish. While the Humane Society of the United States allows animals to be kept in cages for up to three months, many pets were put up for adoption well before the mid-December cutoff—giving owners preoccupied with rebuilding their lives little time to locate their missing pets. "We certainly had the animals' best interests in mind," says Bill Mazurek, the interim executive director for the Humane Society of Pinellas.

That's what Steve and Dorreen Couture wanted when they left their Saint Bernard, Master Tank, and their German Shepherd mix, Nila, at Camp Lucky on Sept. 18 while the family stayed in a temporary shelter that didn't take pets. They say they were told the dogs could stay at Camp Lucky for up to six months. Instead, the National Guard shut the site at the end of September, forcing caretakers to find new places for the

animals. The Humane Society of Pinellas put the Coutures' dogs up for adoption in October, prompting the family to file a civil suit against it and two women who took in the animals. "The separation has been really hard," says Dorreen. "The dogs are part of the family."

The new owners, however, argue the dogs are better off with them. Jeffrey Brown, an attorney for Rhonda and Bud Rineker, who took in Nila—now called Gracie—says the Coutures "forfeited the right to have . . . Gracie back" because they left her behind; the Rinekers also say a veterinarian examined the dog and found she had a pre-hurricane condition of heartworm, a potentially fatal and easily prevented parasite. "Gracie is just really sweet and she's always happy," says Rhonda, a Dunedin, Fla., Realtor who lost her Doberman, Red, to bone cancer not long before

DOGS IN LIMBO



LIL BIT Lisa Downs's young son asks every day when the shih tzu is coming home. A woman in Illinois won't give her back.



TRICKSY Thomas Exnicious III, 23, is taking the Animal Compassion Network to court to get back his Chihuahua from a North Carolina woman.



BANDIT Malvin Cavalier, 86, is working with a lawyer to get back his beloved poodle from a Pennsylvania woman.



MISSY Army First Lt. Jay Johnson, 27, who was in Iraq during Katrina, filed a lawsuit against the SPCA of Texas to get his shih tzu back.



PRECIOUS Linda Charles, 41, filed suit against the Humane Society of North Texas, which adopted out her German Shepherd.

Katrina. "It would break our hearts to have to give her up." The other defendant, Pamela Bondi, who adopted Master Tank, says she won't give back the dog she named Noah because he also had heartworm and was emaciated when she got him. "I love Noah, and just want to ensure that he's well cared for, safe and loved the rest of his life," says Bondi, an assistant state prosecutor.

The Coutures say the defendants are just trying to make them look bad. (Dorreen also says they had the dogs on heartworm medication.) Donna Thomas, an animal activist in New Orleans, says snobbery is a factor: "There's this assumption that somehow everybody in New Orleans was poor and uneducated and incapable of loving their pets." In the 20-plus cases that have gone to court,

judges so far have favored the original owners—a pattern Marino hopes will hold in his case. Now living in Metairie, La., he continues to search for Sinatra—and wishes he could turn to Max for comfort. "He's helped me through a lot of tough times," Marino says.

By Bob Meadows, Anne Lang, Amy Margolin and Katie Gutierrez in Austin

BACK IN A SPLASH

Dolphins thrive in the Bahamian sun after Katrina ruined their Mississippi home

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, eight dolphins from the Marine Life Oceanarium in Gulfport, Miss., roamed the Gulf of Mexico for almost two weeks—scared, hungry and seeking human interaction, their home destroyed by the storm. Life is better these days. In January they moved—along with eight others, six of which were relocated to motel swimming pools before the storm hit—to the Atlantis resort in the Bahamas, where they will be part of an interactive exhibit. Says Jeff Siegel, a former trainer: "The moment the dolphins hit that habitat, it was like the storm never happened." There was no possibility of

rebuilding their old place, says Oceanarium chairman Don Jacobs. Putting them in temporary homes meant a wrenching choice: severing their social unit. The Atlantis' offer to take the whole pod seemed the best solution. And there will still be a Mississippi connection: Under a program called Katrina Kids, displaced Gulf Coast families will be flown to visit the dolphins. Says Jacobs: "These dolphins, too, are survivors."

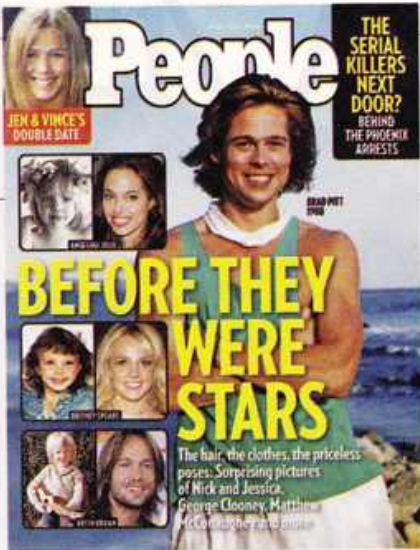


THEN GULFPORT
Before the storm hit, these dolphins were relocated to a local motel swimming pool.



NOW ATLANTIS
Trainer Teri Corbett helps the dolphins enjoy the Bahamian life.

DOGS: FROM LEFT, COURTESY LISA DOWNS; COURTESY THOMAS EXNICKIOUS III; COURTESY MALVIN CAVALIER III; COURTESY JAYAN JOHNSON; COURTESY LINDA CHARLES; DOLPHINS: FROM TOP, YANNIS MALIYI/REX USA; FROM BOTTOM, SHANE SMITH; COURTESY ATLANTIS RESORT



MailBag

“It was fun to see early pictures of our favorite stars, like a special ‘treat’ mixed in with the regular articles” **Cindy Schultz** Franklin, Wis.

BEFORE THEY WERE STARS

I just returned home from vacation and was so excited to see a PEOPLE magazine with all my mail. I took a quick glance and thought, “Why is Princess Stephanie of Monaco on the cover?” I was wondering what she could have done. Imagine my surprise when I realized it was Brad Pitt. Thanks for the laugh. I needed some levity as I opened all of my bills.

Brenda Witwer Austin, Texas

Are you sure that was a photo of Brad Pitt on the cover? It sure looked like actress Brooke Burns to me.

Christie Berryhill Rock Island, Ill.

After looking at the pictures in the Before They Were Stars article, please tell me that at least one of the ladies has the nose with which she was born. I guess what is on the outside wins out over what is on the inside.

Deb Figley Marysville, Penn.

ABRAHAM CHERRIX

I am deeply disturbed by the story of 16-year-old Abraham Cherrix, who suffers from Hodgkin’s disease, and how the Accomack County Department of Social Services in Virginia believes that they have any say in the medical choices made by him and his parents. The fact that a judge awarded the county temporary joint custody is ludicrous. The type of medical treatment used to treat cancer, or any serious illness for that matter, should be the sole decision of the patient and, in this case, in joint agreement with

his parents. The government should have no jurisdiction over these very personal, individual decisions. Shame on Accomack County and the judge for putting this well-researched and intelligent family through more trauma.

Stephanie Burton Barrie, Ont.

It is unfortunate to see the story of a young man so determined to defy the odds and the recommendations of wiser individuals that he ignores the advice of his doctors. What’s worse is that his parents support him. He may be 16, but in the eyes of the law, he is a child and therefore incapable of making these decisions. Although it is true that conventional cancer treatments are usually painful and unpleasant, they actually work. They worked for him once already. I work in the medical field and see people go through this every day. The sad fact is, if this child refuses this treatment, he will likely die. And for what?

Angela Foster East Amherst, N.Y.

MARY-LOUISE PARKER

Mary-Louise Parker, you sound like a loving and responsible mom. Your little William seems like a happy little 2-year-old. You say, “He’s just not one of those children that throw themselves on the ground and scream.” I had to laugh out loud when reading this. I’m the mom of three young boys, and they were angelic, too. Then they turned 3. There is no such thing as the “terrible twos.” It’s all about the terrible threes. Like my mother says, “Be careful what you say or you’ll end up eating word sandwiches.”

Camille Miller Hilliard, Ohio

WRITE US

TO CONTACT EDITORIAL: Send a fax (212-522-0794), e-mail (editor@people.com) or mail (Letters to the Editor, PEOPLE, Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, N.Y. 10020). Letters should include the writer’s full name, address and daytime phone number, and may be edited for clarity and space.

DOGGONE DILEMMA

We received nearly 600 letters about our article on Katrina evacuees who left their dogs behind when the storm hit land and are now suing to get back their dogs from the new owners. “To the brave people who adopted pets left behind during Katrina, bravo. But now it’s time to reunite those pets with their rightful owners,” writes Joan Scholl of Algodones, N.Mex. “Haven’t those people lost enough?” Close to 90 percent of the letters were supportive of the original owners, but some readers saw the situation differently. “Whoa. The owners left their pets to fend for themselves, and now that loving people adopted them they want them back? I don’t think so,” writes Rachel Kristol of Aberdeen, N.J. “If you abandon your pets, regardless of circumstance, you also abandon your right to them.”

