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“Who’d have thought someone would take your dog? ... I had no idea people could be so cruel.”

Chantelle Schenning whose dog, Bella, is missing and presumed to have been stolen

Man’s best friend now a growing target for thieves

Baltimore area sees a sharp increase in dog theft

BY JONATHAN PITTS | The Baltimore Sun

As she struggled to unload groceries from the back of her car, Sherrie Schenning got an uncharacteristically queasy feeling.

Her family’s Essex neighborhood had always felt safe, but on this recent Saturday, she noticed two unfamiliar young men in a nearby schoolyard eyeing their home.

“They looked like they wanted to steal something, but there was nothing valuable in the yard,” she says — just her shopping bags and the family’s beloved 12-year-old dog, Bella, who was snuffling around for attention.

Five minutes later, the groceries were put away, the young men were nowhere in sight, and Bella, a floppy-eared Yorkshire terrier, was gone, an apparent victim of what some are calling an increasing crime problem in the Baltimore area: dognapping.

“With the economy the way it is, a lot of people are in a bad way, and we’re seeing more dogs get stolen for all kinds of reasons,” says Anne Wills, who runs a nonprofit in Arbutus that uses trained search



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Anne Wills, founder of Dogs Finding Dogs, prepares to search for a missing pet with her dog, Heidi. Her group has recovered more than 2,000 pets.

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Baltimore region sees a surge in dog thefts

DOGS, From page 1
dogs to locate missing pets.

The American Kennel Club, which maintains a national database of dog thefts, says it sees a nationwide trend. The New York-based group reports that the number of reported thefts more than doubled between 2009 and 2011, rising from 162 to 432 over those years.

"And those numbers are just scratching the surface," says Lisa Peterson, an AKC spokeswoman. The organization bases its figures on media reports of stolen dogs and customers who call its Companion Animal Recovery service.

Wills says animal thieves have many motivations. Many steal dogs to sell, ransom, breed or give away. Individuals tied to dog fighting are always on the lookout for large, muscular canines they can train for bouts — or weaker ones as "bait" on which the fighters can learn to maim or kill.

"These people want to keep their fighting dogs in shape and they're looking to grab little dogs that can't fight back," says Darlene Harris, the former manager of the Baltimore City shelter. "It's horrific."

The perpetrators sometimes dump the bait dogs, or return them, scarred or missing appendages, Harris says, adding that the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter has gotten several such dropoffs a week since 2010.

City and county police say they've noticed no significant spike in dog thefts, but Wills and Harris both say they've seen a surge in the Baltimore area over the past year.

"It has definitely gotten a hell of a lot worse," Wills says.

Her organization, Dogs Finding Dogs, gets about 15 calls a day and works a dozen or so cases at a time. More than half now turn out to involve acts of animal thievery.

Chelsea McKenzie, a pit bull owner from Glen Burnie, has lost two dogs to thieves.

"It's the people [involved] who are the animals," she says.

The dog advocates who track thefts say perpetrators often travel away from their



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO
Anne Wills, shown with her dog, Heidi, started Dogs Finding Dogs in 2008. She says she has noticed a serious increase in dog thefts over the past year.



More online

See video of Anne Wills and her dog, Heidi, searching for a missing pet at baltimoresun.com

police had to be called to help her retrieve it from individuals who cursed and shouted threats.

Peterson, of the American Kennel Club, has heard of thieves stealing dogs from cars, off leashes in front of restaurants, from animal shelters, even out of children's arms

and several West and Southwest Baltimore neighborhoods, including the Wilkens Avenue corridor.

Wills says she has been averaging seven new calls a day from Essex alone in recent weeks.

Baltimore and Baltimore County police, including those in the Essex Precinct, say they have noticed no particular spike in dog thefts. But they add that that doesn't mean it isn't happening.

Victimized owners sometimes assume a dog is merely lost and so don't contact law enforcement. And police group animal theft with other property theft, so it's difficult to

stolen. At first, such cases took up about a third of her time. The portion has jumped to more than 50 percent over the past year.

It is not unusual, she says, to follow a trail to a malefactor's door and see or hear the missing animal inside, only to hear the thief deny it was there at all or try to sneak it out a back door.

Violators are young and old, and of all races. Some are little old ladies who have "found" a new pet and refuse to give it back.

In one case, a dog owner found a man walking her pet on Belair Road in Baltimore. When she confronted him, he pulled a gun.

"We're talking about people who are not always the classiest forms of life," says Wills.

While police can't make animal searches a top priority, she says, many officers are willing to assist in making arrests if she or her colleagues have followed the trail to a site and a neighbor can confirm the pet's presence.

Three years ago, McKenzie was living in Brooklyn when her beloved pit bull, Marley, disappeared from her fenced-in backyard. She contacted Dogs Finding Dogs, and was amazed to see Wills and Heidi make a straight line for a rowhouse Marley used to frequent.

Wills encourages owners to supplement the sniff searches by plastering neighborhoods with posters, setting up Facebook pages, taking out online ads and using FindToto.com, a service that can bombard an area with prerecorded alerts, all in hopes of pressuring thieves or turning up a lead.

McKenzie, who took out a Craigslist ad, eventually got an anonymous call from a woman who told her Marley had been left at the Anne Arundel County animal shelter.

There he was, covered with cuts and scrapes, as though he'd been in fights, but otherwise healthy.

"I had my four-legged son back," recalls McKenzie. She later recounted the case on "Justice With Judge Janine," a national cable TV program.

The Schennings feel as though they've lost a family member. They met Wills in

In one recent case, two young men from South Baltimore traveled to Patapsco Valley State Park, where they snatched an Ellicott City man's dog when he let it off its leash during a walk.

Wills' team tracked it from there to Dundalk, then later to Brooklyn, where

microchipped for easy identification,

Since she started Dogs Finding Dogs in 2008, Wills has found dog theft most prevalent in a handful of areas, including Essex, Dundalk and Parkville in Baltimore County; Brooklyn Park in Anne Arundel

woman for the Baltimore County Police. Dogs Finding Dogs keeps Wills, her own search dog and her team of nine human and nine canine volunteers so busy she's at work on cases from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. most days.

Wills works for donations. She says her outfit has recovered more than 2,000 pets, an average of more than one per week.

Wills fell into the field almost by accident. The first dog she ever owned, a mostly German shepherd pup named Heidi, proved so energetic she was hard to control. Wills' boyfriend, a cop who worked with a canine unit, suggested she put Heidi through police-dog training.

When Wills learned how many citizens contact police dog units asking for help with lost pets — a service they don't offer — she took her dog on a few free calls.

Demand was so high she soon quit her old job.

Each of her volunteer dog-and-human tracking teams is certified through the National Tactical Police Dog Association and can work day or night in any weather.

There were always plenty of calls for lost-pet cases, but Wills says her greatest surprise was learning how often pets are

little shadow," Chantelle says. The tiny dog always licked her face when she was ill, and continued to sleep with her.

"I don't even want to think about what might be happening to her," she says, tears welling in her eyes.

A few days after Bella vanished, Wills and Heidi tracked her scent to the edge of the yard, where the trail abruptly ended.

Since then, Chantelle has posted more than 1,000 fliers, made robocalls through FindToto.com, contacted schools, police stations and pet stores, offered a reward and made it known she'll accept Bella back "no questions asked."

Wills says she'll be returning with Heidi to search again.

"We're ratcheting up the pressure," she says.

In the meantime, the Schennings are having trouble sleeping at night.

"Who'd have thought someone would take your dog?" Chantelle says. "If we'd known this was happening, we'd have been more careful. I had no idea people could be so cruel."

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DEATH / LODGE NOTICES

REESE, Danial "Danny"

DANIAL "Danny" REESE (born Reese Danial Blankenship) 61, of Naples, FL passed away suddenly on April 28, 2013. Danny was born in Havre de Grace, MD to Helen Sullivan Blankenship and the late Reese J. Blankenship and grew up in Delta, PA. He was a 1969 graduate of Kennard-Dale High School in Fawn Grove, PA where he was an all-state sprinter for the track team. Danny began his successful career as an on-air radio personality on WNOW in York, PA, and then moved on to WPOC (Old Blue Eyes), WITH, and WCAO in the Baltimore, MD market. After 20 years in the radio industry, Danny then moved into the public relations, insurance, mortgage and sales fields. Danny is survived by his loving wife, Ronni. They relocated from MD to Naples in 2005 to enjoy the FL sunshine and lifestyle. Danny never lost his passion for music. He brought his high school rock and roll band, Sites 'N Sounds, together in May, 2010 to perform once again for their MD/PA fans, and they continue to reunite twice a year for performances there. In 2011, Danny joined the Fort Myers-based classic rock band, Redemption, as their front man, and they performed throughout Fort Myers, Cape Coral, Matlacha, and Naples. Danny is also survived by his loving children, Lauren Reynolds of Abingdon, MD, and Adam Reynolds of Baltimore, MD. He also leaves behind his mother, Helen Blankenship, devoted brother and sister-in-law, Dick and Denise Blankenship, and sister and brother-in-law, Sharon and Randy King, all from Stewartstown, PA, along with many nieces and nephews. "DR" will continue to rock on in the hearts of everyone who knew him.

A celebration of his life and a memorial service were held in Naples. A memorial service for family and friends near Danny's childhood home will be announced in the near future. Online condolences may be made at www.fullernaples.com

RUTKOWSKI, Margaret E.

On May 1, 2013, MARGARET E. RUTKOWSKI (nee BUTT); beloved wife of the late Richard C. Rutkowski; dear sister of Leonard Butt and the late Cecelia Tanner, Philip, Leo and Joseph Butt. Also survived by many loving nieces and nephews.

Relatives and friends may gather at Schimunek Funeral Home, Inc. 9705 Belair Rd., Nottingham, MD 21236, on Sunday 3-5 and 7-9 PM. A Mass of Christian Burial will be celebrated at St. Stephen's Catholic Church, Bradshaw Rd. Kingsville, MD, at 10 AM on Monday. Interment Bel Air Memorial Gardens. Online tributes may be left at

www.schimunekfuneralhomes.com



SCHAMMEL, Cora "Joan"

On April 30, 2013, JOAN (nee GRIFFITH). Beloved wife of the late Carl W. Schammel, devoted mother of Steven Schammel and the late Larry Schammel. Loving

STANDIFORD, Lorraine M.

On April 29, 2013 LORRAINE M. STANDIFORD (nee MITCHELL). Dearest Wife of Melvin L. Standiford. Devoted Mother of Tabitha Strucko and her boyfriend Michael Massaro. Beloved Sister of the late Margaret "Peggy" Eckerl. Loving Grandmother of Tyler J. Strucko and Seth Massaro. Dear Aunt of Alice M. and Larry B. Walker. Also survived by many other loving Nieces, Nephews, Relatives and Friends.

Family invite friends to call at the Charles L. Stevens Funeral Home, Inc. 1501 East Fort Avenue, Locust Point MD, 21230 on Thursday and Friday 3-5 PM and 7-9 PM. Funeral Services will be held at the funeral home on Saturday at 11 AM. Interment will be private. Family request in lieu of flowers contributions be made to the Visiting Nurse Association of Hanover, Spring Grove & Adams County (800) 422-3197. vna-hanover.org Additional information and Tribute site may be viewed at

www.charlesl.stevensfuneralhome.com

STOUT, JR., Kenneth T.



KENNETH THOMAS STOUT, JR., 86, died peacefully at his home on Friday, April 26, 2013. Born in Annapolis, MD, he had been a VA Peninsula resident for the past 68 years. Ken was a former Coast Guard Marine. In 1974, he retired from the U.S. Army as a CW4 with 20 years of service to his country. He was a member of the American Legion Post #368. He was also a member of the NRA and an avid gun enthusiast.

Kenneth is survived by his loving wife of 57 years, M. Lee Stout; his son, Kenneth Michael Stout; his daughter, Donna M. Woods and husband, Richard; and one granddaughter, Robin Lee Woods, all of Newport News. He will be greatly missed by family and friends.

A Memorial Service will be held at 2 PM, on Saturday, May 4, 2013 at the Regimental Chapel on Ft. Eustis with military honors. Arrangements are by Weymouth Funeral Home.

Donald C. Lewis, Cmdr.

STROUP, JR., J. William

Boumi Shrine Legion of Honor announces with deep regret the passing of Legion Noble J. WILLIAM STROUP, JR. and extends sincere sympathy to his family.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, May 4th, 11 AM, at Salem Lutheran Church, 905 Frederick Road, Catonsville, MD 21228. For further information, please visit www.singletonfuneralhome.com.

WELBOURN, JR., E. Hambleton

On April 29, 2013, E. HAMBLETON WELBOURN, JR.; beloved husband of 62 years to Nancy Parker Welbourn; devoted father of Lucy W. Johnson of Charlottesville, VA, Nancy W. Edds and Lynn Edds of Fargo, ND and

Stent recipients settle lawsuit against doctor, St. Joseph

MIDEI, From page 1

represents significant progress toward resolving the legal troubles of the once highly ranked cardiologist.

Plaintiffs claimed Midei performed unnecessary stent procedures on them, leaving them with lasting medical complications, and that the hospital failed to provide sufficient oversight.

Midei has denied wrongdoing. He was forced to leave the hospital, now University of Maryland St. Joseph Medical Center, after the allegations surfaced in 2009.

The accusations led to a federal investigation and a loss of staff and revenue at the hospital, which eventually was sold to the University of Maryland Medical System. Midei lost his medical license in 2011.

Michael J. Baxter, Midei's attorney, said in court that the cardiologist had tried to serve his patients well.

"He thought and believed in his heart that he was doing what was best for them and their health," Baxter said.

Baltimore School of Law, said the settlement could not be used as evidence in any potential future litigation.

Otherwise, he said, "no one would ever want to settle."

Andrew G. Slutkin, a Baltimore attorney who represented nearly 20 Midei patients who settled earlier, said he's rarely seen so much litigation surrounding a single doctor.

"I thought this case would settle at some point. There was significant risk on both sides. Settlements occur because the parties don't want to lose," he said. Trials are complicated and expensive, he added.

Midei is suing St. Joseph for defamation in a separate action now before the state's second-highest court.

Stephen L. Snyder, his attorney in that case, said he was disappointed Midei did not have the opportunity to speak during the trial, which ended Thursday after three weeks. The proceeding had been expected to run three months.

"Why torture him with preparations ... and then settle?" Snyder asked.