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RSDR: Street Dog rescue. Helping our furry friends

Bulgaria has many street dogs who are often subjected to the most horrendous cruelty. They are kicked, beaten and shot on a regular basis for no other reason than that it provides certain individuals with amusement. Many of these dogs are injured, in pain, or starving and in the winter there is a high chance that they will freeze to death.

Rudozem Street Dog Rescue

Help us to help them



Rudozem Street Dog Rescue (RSDR) is a non-profit foundation that rescues Street Dogs in Bulgaria and finds loving homes for them.

By Siddhant Sadangi for Youth Leader

Siddhant Sadangi gets a chance to talk to **Diane Rowles**, founder of RSDR.

SS: Can you walk us through the events and the set up which led to the inception of this idea?

DR: In August 2007, I, along with my husband Tony Rowles and our 4 children, moved to Rudozem, Bulgaria from the United Kingdom. We were shocked by the local's abuse towards street dogs in Bulgaria. Dogs are spat on, kicked, shot or have stones thrown at them. The family started to feed the dogs on the streets out of their own money.

In September 2007, our youngest son Luke befriended a street dog named Ranger, and the dog started following him. Ranger became our first rescue dog when a man was trying to shoot him.

With the continuing number of street dogs needing to be fed on the streets, we registered a foundation, Rudozem Street Dog Rescue known also as RSDR. This was registered in March 2009. Since March 2009, RSDR have taken over two hundred and fifty (250) dogs and puppies off the streets of Rudozem.



Luke with Ranger

The story of Ranger (as told by Diane)

Ranger was one of the many hungry and abused street dogs in Bulgaria. At some stage in his life, he had received a horrific head injury which has left him with an odd shaped skull and his face is paralysed down one side. My youngest son, Luke would see him when he went to the town centre. He told me about the dog and how he had been told by his friends that someone had caused the dogs head injury by hitting him over the head with a large stone. The dog was very wary and would have nothing to do with people. Luke was told to keep away from him in case he got bitten.

However he carried on talking to the dog and throwing him bits of

food and before long, the dog was following him everywhere and waiting outside all night for him, sometimes in the pouring rain. We told Luke not to encourage him as there would be fighting with our other dogs but despite trying to send him away, he would not go.

Neighbours were not happy about a street dog hanging about. Many times, old ladies would beat him badly with large sticks; children would throw stones at him and shoot him with air rifles. One day, children were being cruel to him and he turned and jumped at one of them. Although she wasn't bitten, the girl was shocked and her father came after Ranger with a shotgun, firing it at him outside the house while Liam and Luke were trying to get him in the garden. The police then came to the house and we explained that he wasn't our dog, he was a street dog, but if people weren't cruel to him, there wasn't a problem. We were still told that if we didn't keep him on a chain, we would have to take him to be put down. We tried to keep him on a chain but because of his odd shaped head, he could slip a collar.

One day he escaped for no longer than five minutes. He had a run about with Liam and Luke trying to catch him then ran straight back. He never bothered anyone. Minutes later, I saw a man at the gate and went out to see what he wanted. He started shouting and waving a handgun at me. At this point I just wanted to be back in the UK where people couldn't get away with such cruelty or wave a handgun at a woman. The police told us it would be best if Ranger was put to sleep. As we had just recently moved there, we were slightly intimidated and never thought to question the legal rights of it all. The police told my husband Tony to take the dog to a town 25kms away, meet the guy, pay him and Ranger would be put down.

Tony took Ranger to be put down. We were all heartbroken, especially Luke who blamed himself for making friends with the dog in the first place. Four nights later, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking Ranger is somehow alive and trying to find his way back. The next morning, there he was at the doorstep, hungry and exhausted. . We realised after Ranger came back the whole thing wasn't quite right and no way would we let him go again without a battle. We never found out what happened to him in those few days and didn't pursue it. My guess is that instead of putting him down, the guy sold him as a guard dog and he escaped. Despite being locked up, Ranger came back to where he would be fed and cared for and to a young boy who probably showed him the first bit of kindness in his life.

SS: Could you provide a brief outline of your purpose, mission and vision?



DR: RSDR's mission is to raise enough funds to renovate a dog shelter to save many more street dogs, start a neuter / spay programme once the shelter is established, and integrate education on Animal Welfare to the local community.

SS: What is your primary approach to promoting this concept?

DR: The primary approach is to get the shelter renovated, so it is structurally sound and safe. This not only ensures the continuity of saving dogs in the streets, but gives protection to these animals in the winter months.

During this last winter, there was the reality that the roof would collapse at any stage due to the heavy snow and could fall on top of the 100 dogs inside as well as humans.

To read more about the dangers with the roof with photos, please go to our blog at:

<http://www.streetdogrescue.com/apps/blog/>



We appeal through social applications like Facebook for persons to donate to our "roof" widget, which is on the donate / help page of our website, as well as through emails and newsletters.

Donate page: <http://www.streetdogrescue.com/donatehelp.htm>

The importance of the appeal for renovations is due to the harsh reality that if there is no shelter for the dogs, then it is most likely they will die in the winter months if the roof collapses.

For over 2 years RSDR had been trying to raise enough funds for a dog shelter / clinic to save the many dogs in the Rudozem area. We had made numerous appeals to the mayor and the municipality but had been told that they cannot help. Since early 2010, we started looking for plots of land that might be suitable for a dog shelter / clinic. In October 2010 we found a plot of land with an existing building. Although the building needed lots of work, it was an ideal place for the shelter/clinic. Previously we had been working from our own family home. We also had complaints from neighbours in the past year about the noise level from the dogs. There was the constant worry that we could have been asked, to get rid of the dogs at any time, and the dogs sent to a Dog Isolator. This is the last thing we would want to have happen – as the Dog Isolators are places of torture.

A worldwide appeal for donations for the dog shelter / clinic through our website, Facebook and other social

applications was implemented and we received numerous support and kind donations from persons all across the world who helped fundraise to achieve our target goal. The contracts were signed on the 22 December 2010.

Now that we have the shelter, we need to urgently renovate it, as the roof is quite dangerous with the danger of it collapsing due to the heavy snow.

SS: Bulgaria is certainly not one of the best places for street dogs, what challenges did you face while establishing and conducting your activities?

DR: There are many street dogs and street cats in the area of Rudozem. Many of them are starving and hungry and have horrible skin conditions and are abused by the local community.

Many puppies are born on the streets and are left to survive and in the winter months they usually freeze to death.



Bobbi and pups

The majority of the street dogs are not dangerous. Many of them are terrified of people and would not go near them. Most of the time if a human went near a street dog, it would most likely run away. The dogs are extremely wary of people, not used to human contact and are scared you are going to hurt them. It takes many weeks and months to gain the trust of these animals.

A lot of the community are not educated on Animal Welfare and have been brought up to fear street dogs and treat them like vermin. You will see many people throw stones at the dogs, kick them, beat them with sticks, or even shoot them. It is no wonder the dogs are so scared of mankind. They have not been treated kindly.

There has been a lot of opposition from officials, the municipality and locals. Many people can't understand why anyone would bother trying to help the street dogs as they regard them as vermin. Municipalities are allocated money to deal with the problem of street dogs but this rarely gets spent on dogs. There is a lot of corruption and illegal shootings still go on. 2011 was a very difficult and stressful year for us. We had intended to renovate the building we bought as a shelter before moving dogs there. However we had many urgent cases and nowhere for them so we built temporary pens and moved there with the dogs. We had numerous visits from police, the municipality and other officials trying to close the shelter. We had to wait months before the prosecutor decided if he could make any charges against us. Eventually we were granted a certificate which meant we could legally keep dogs there.

SS: While you battled such challenges, what was the motivation that kept you going?

DR: Knowing that there was no one else to help these dogs... We are responsible for all the dogs that we have already rescued. Things do get very hard. At times, we are exhausted both physically and emotionally but we have to keep going because our dogs depend on us and so do many more that are on the streets. No one else here will help, feed or speak up for these dogs.

SS: Can you provide us a sneak into the activities conducted by you?

DR: We usually get up at about 6.30 am and let the dogs out that live with us in the staff room. Any sick pups or dogs recovering from operations are kept next to the staff room which is where we sleep. We start by seeing to those dogs and pups, feeding them and giving them any medications that they are on. The boys who work here arrive at 8.30 am and start letting dogs out, feeding them and cleaning pens. Dogs are walked throughout the day. Yards have to be tidied, rubbish has to be taken to the landfill, and we have to collect sawdust for the pens. At some stage during the day we drive to Rudozem and feed and check on any street dogs that we feed and make a note of any new dogs that appear on the streets. Sometimes we have to take dogs to be spayed; which is an hour's drive away.

We will sometimes receive a phone call or see pups or dogs that urgently need help so we have to drop whatever we are doing and go out on a rescue. There is always so much admin to do and sometimes I can be doing admin from 8am until the early hours of the next morning.

We have to keep a note of which dogs are due for worming, flea treatments and vaccinations and order vaccinations and arrange for the vet to come out.

Tony has to find time during the day to take photos, do videos and measure or weigh dogs that people are interested in adopting.



Diane saying goodbye to Lisa

SS: How is RSDR different from other rescue organisations?

DR: The difference between RSDR and other rescue organisations is that there is no help from the government or local municipality or local people themselves unless we pay them to help us.

We have many dogs that are unsuitable for adoption but we don't put them to sleep. We can work for months with a dog that has been badly abused and has serious trust issues and as long as just one person is able to handle and care for that dog, we will be responsible for it. We love and care for each dog that we rescue as if it were our only family pet.

SS: Is there any moment, incident, or person that has carved a special place in this journey? Our readers will like to hear about this?



Kosta with Finn

DR: It is mainly dogs themselves that have carved a special place along this journey. The first was Ranger. We felt that what we had given him was so little and yet he travelled for miles and days to get back to us.

Honey was a street dog that was in the town with a litter of pups. We had known her for quite some time and fed her every day. This was before we became a registered charity or had an adoption scheme in place so we were limited as to how many dogs we could take in. Seeing cruelty on a daily basis, we had serious doubts about even staying in Bulgaria. Honey and all but one of her pups were shot; the remaining pup was badly beaten and much traumatised. We were all heartbroken. My youngest son was in

tears and begged us to move as he said he couldn't take any more. I had to question my role as a parent that I was subjecting my kids to all this upset so I said we would move. One of the proudest moments as a mother was when my son later came back to me and said, "Mum, we can't move can we? If we go, there will be no one who will look out for the dogs". After a long time of indecision as to whether we would stay, that was a turning point. We knew from then on that no matter how tough things got, we would stay for the sake of the dogs.

In the early days we contacted many organisations and asked them for help and advice regarding becoming a charity. Not a single one helped us. The only advice we received was to forget it and try and raise funds for them instead. We made our own website and started our own Facebook group and had to learn as we went along. We will never forget the people who donated and had faith in us in the early days.

We now have adoption teams in different countries and Anita, RSDR secretary. All of these people give up so much of their time voluntarily. We cannot do what we do without them and they have all carved a special place in our lives.

SS: Anybody whom you would give credit for supporting (inspiring) you in this mission?

DR: The people who donate and support us and the people who have adopted our dogs. I can't mention everyone individually but everyone in the RSDR team. They work tirelessly to find homes for our dogs; raise funds and give us moral and emotional support when things get tough. Anita introduced many things which were beyond my technical capabilities and has kept things going for us when we have been ill, busy or not had internet. Some team members have been over to see us and help with the dogs.



Yafka, Harri and Liam with Jacky, Jemma and Grimble

SS: Do you have any future road map for your RSDR considering the positive response it has garnered?

DR: The future map is still our current goals which is to renovate the shelter, start a spay/neuter programme and implement education on animal welfare.

These goals are long term goals that can take years before they will be accomplished. However RSDR is in it for the long haul.

SS: Any breakthroughs or achievements which you would like to share?

DR: *Purchase of the shelter building / land in December 2010.

*Over 250 of our dogs have been adopted in other countries since March 2009.

SS: There are people and organizations which want to serve the cause; can you guide them about ways to join?

DR: If persons want to volunteer to help our adoption teams in their relevant country, they can contact any of our adoption teams on the contact page of our website at:

<http://www.streetdogrescue.com/contactus.htm>

If persons would like to help with fundraising, we have a fundraising form they can fill out on our website if they would like to do their own fundraising event:

<http://www.streetdogrescue.com/fundraiseforus.htm>

If they would like to be daily updated on what is happening at RSDR, they can join as a member on our website on the home page at: www.streetdogrescue.com

Or they can join our Facebook page at: <http://www.facebook.com/rudozemstreetdogrescue>

SS: What would be your message for the youngsters reading this?

DR: For anyone thinking of going into rescue work with animals, it is a tough road to travel and often there are more bad times than good. At times you find it difficult to rejoice in the success stories because you beat yourself up over the ones that you couldn't save. You will have little time to yourself and probably little money. People you thought were your friends may turn their backs on you and fail to see the value of what you do but for every one of them you will find a true friend who does support you through thick or thin.

Some people measure their success by what car they drive, what clothes they wear, the company they keep and where they live. All of that can be lost in just a day and they are left with nothing. If you dedicate your life to helping other people or animals, no one can take away from you the fact that you have lived a life that matters. No matter how big or small, you will have made a difference in your time spent on this earth.

'You may not be able to change the world for all animals but for that one animal you save, you are its world'.

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