



Bringing up FIDO

Far from their original Mexican home, healthy and happy Lobito (left) and Maya have new tales to tell.

This artist found a new passion,
rescuing Mexican mutts and
finding them loving homes here

THE BLACK CAT staring from the second-floor window looks in a pique, but the little blond girl shivering in the cold on the lawn below looks delighted. The object of both pairs of eyes is another little blond, Bertha. Bertha seems ecstatic as she races repeatedly in a circle along the deck, over the rocky lawn, under the deck and back up again. Occasionally she stops to sniff something or scratch.

Bertha is a part-Golden Retriever puppy, brought to this house in Metchosin to see if it will be her new home. "So do we get to keep her?" the mother in the hopeful family asks excitedly. Marlene Davis smiles and replies, "I think this will make a lovely home for Bertha."

It's a long way from Bertha's last home: the streets of Guanajuato, Mexico, where the "Mexi mutt" was found, her stomach so distended from parasites she was barely able to move. Davis rescued the puppy from a life of certain misery and brought her to Canada.

Davis has two passions: pets and painting. Davis is an accomplished artist: her work is in collections including those of the estate of Michael Williams, Camosun College and the Province of British Columbia. But lately, she says, "dogs have taken over. But it's all worthwhile when I see them go to their homes."

Davis's relationship with the street dogs of Guanajuato goes back 10 years. In 1999, she founded a non-profit, called Mex-Can Pet Partners, to raise funds for *Los Amigos de los Animales de Guanajuato* (Friends of the Animals of Guanajuato). Amigos is a charitable organization that cares and advocates for the city's thousands of abused, neglected and abandoned animals.

"People looked at me like I was crazy," Davis says. They wondered why she cared about animals in Mexico. But to Davis, "any animal I could help was worth it, didn't matter if it was in Mexico, or here, wherever — they all deserve to have a good life." In Canada, she explains, lots of

organizations already help animals. She found an opportunity to help in Mexico and she felt compelled to do so. Receiving the 2003 Humane Award from the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association strengthened her resolve.

Over the years, Davis's work to support Amigos' spay-neuter, rescue-rehabilitation and adoption programs has improved the lives of over 4,000 animals. Since buying a house in Guanajuato a couple of years ago, she has provided a foster home for dozens of rescued dogs — some found, like Bertha, but most dropped anonymously at her house. A few times a year, Davis travels back to Victoria, accompanying as many recovered dogs as she can afford to transport for bringing into well-screened homes, more than 60 in the past two years.

A fee of \$300 covers a dog's \$130 airfare on pet-friendly Aeromexico from Leon, which is 26 kilometres from Guanajuato, to Seattle, its destination closest to Victoria; ferry costs from Seattle; and vet expenses. Before they leave Guanajuato, Davis has the dogs vet checked, vaccinated, dewormed, treated for mange, tested for blood parasites and spayed or neutered. She cares for them while they recuperate because, she says, "I want a healthy animal to come up and find a home."

The day I visit her, Davis and I set off from her Pembroke Street home in a car borrowed from a neighbour, Bertha lying on the back seat. On the way to the "doggie drop" in Metchosin, Davis, a 54-year-old with one brown eye and one blue — "like some dogs" — tells me how she became "so consumed" with dogs. Checks of her written directions, subsequent comments like "Whoops, look out!" and a frequent, lilting laugh punctuate her story.

When Davis and a friend visited Central Mexico in 1999 for its monarch butterfly sanctuaries, it was cruelty, not beauty, that left an impression. "We were both really depressed the whole time," Davis said, "because of all the dogs — stray animals and wandering puppies."

Mexico's pet overpopulation and abuse "crisis" (according to award-winning documentary *Companions to None*) is based, Davis says, on a complex stew of economics, education and religion. "Mexico's a country where the more, the merrier," she said. "Procreation is important, and family, and some people believe animals shouldn't be neutered or spayed because it's nature to make more." But there's a big contradiction, she said, between this value placed on life and the common abuse towards the resulting stray animals wandering the streets and beaches.

"They don't understand that animals are a feeling creature," Davis says. The strays are seen as pests that carry rabies and parasites, so they are poisoned or rounded up and shot. A more humane solution, Davis said, is to spay and neuter so overpopulation isn't created in the first place.

Even family pets are commonly neglected and abandoned. "They love their animals, but they stick them on a roof, don't feed them or give them shelter from rain, wind, and sun," Davis said. When an animal dies or is rescued, they don't know what they've done. "You have to understand, these people don't have any money. They hardly have money to feed themselves or their children."

In the 10 years since she first travelled to Guanajuato and started working with *Amigos*, Davis told me, the stray population has decreased. And locals' attitudes are slowly changing — in December 2007, the municipality passed a regulation to protect animals from abuse and neglect and set up a department to receive complaints. "Millions of people have travelled to Mexico and say they'll never go back because of the dogs," Davis said. But she did and proved wrong the naysayers who said any contribution she made would be "just a drop in the bucket."

Bertha has found a home. The street dog from Mexico has a family to love her and a grieving family has a puppy to replace the dog that recently died.

Davis wipes away a few tears as we walk towards the car, not looking back to prevent Bertha from following her rescuer and companion of the past few months. "Hang on!" she says with a laugh as we pull out of the driveway — then, contentedly, "Rags to riches."

Mex-Can Pet Partners adoption applications can be downloaded from the website, www.mex-can.org, completed and emailed to marlene@mex-can.org. Adoption fee is \$300. Home check is required.

OTHER DOG RESCUE OPTIONS

Many Victoria-area groups work to rescue and rehabilitate homeless animals. Mosaic Rescue, for example, brings dogs from a "high kill" shelter in Little Rock, Arkansas, to Victoria. Many of the dogs test positive for heartworm, a parasite common in Arkansas; most people who want a dog from the shelter are reluctant to pay for the expensive veterinary treatment, but Mosaic provides it to ensure the dogs are healthy when they arrive in Victoria. See mosaicrescue.ca.

The SPCA brings dogs from shelters in other parts of the province to Victoria, where they have a much better chance of finding a home. See spca.bc.ca/pet-care/adoption.

VictoriaAdoptables.com runs its own dog rescue program to help stray dogs on Vancouver Island and across the border, and links to other animal rescue organizations. Two local pounds and 16 rescue organizations currently post animal profiles on the site.

Mexi Mutt Rescue is a Cowichan-based organization that also saves Mexican dogs. See meximutt.com. **VB**