

backstory

By CYNTHIA ANDERSON
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BOSTON

As Christine Dorchak and her dog Zoe enter a meeting for about 70 volunteers at the MSPCA-Angell animal hospital, the room begins to buzz. Zoe bounds ahead, commanding her share of attention – especially after she dons a red, white, and blue jacket that reads “Vote for the Dogs.” But eyes soon swing to Ms. Dorchak, who is accorded near-hero status in the greyhound protection community.

Carey Thiel, the executive director of GREY2K USA, a greyhound advocacy group, introduces her as “the rules queen,” there to explain how to obtain signatures for a proposed state ballot measure in Massachusetts that would outlaw greyhound racing. It’s immediately evident, though, that Dorchak is more than a procedural expert.

The place grows hushed as she tells the story of how she became a crusader for greyhounds, one of the nation’s most ardent. On Sept. 10, 1992, while walking her dog in Boston, Dorchak was struck by a train and thrown under the wheels. Paramedics pronounced her dead at the scene. Her mother was contacted to identify the body.

Somehow, Dorchak reclaimed life during the ambulance ride to the hospital. Some might credit her overall health or relative youth at the time with enabling her to survive, but Dorchak believes a greater force was at work. “I was brought back,” she says. “I was reborn that day for a reason.”

That reason, Dorchak would come to believe, is advocacy for the state’s 2,600 racing greyhounds, which in its most recent manifestation has taken form as the Greyhound Protection Act.

The bill, which will appear on the November 2008 ballot if the requisite signatures are gathered, seeks to phase out commercial dog racing in Massachusetts by 2010. Two tracks – Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere and Raynham Park in Raynham – face closure if it passes.

As someone poised to help bring down the industry – first in Massachusetts, she hopes, and then elsewhere in the nation – Dorchak isn’t popular among those who love dog racing. Her stance is characterized by “excessive rhetoric and misrepresentation” and “hysterical animal rights claims,” Vera Filipelli, a spokesperson for Derby Lane in St. Petersburg, Fla., wrote in a letter to the editor of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel.

Such criticisms don’t faze Dorchak. Like many crusaders before her, she is single-mindedly resolute. Yet, in many ways, Dorchak seems an unlikely zealot. As she makes her rounds between signature drives and meetings, she favors pinstriped suits with pumps. Her laughter comes easily and often, and she’s as comfortable in the Massachusetts statehouse as she is in the Somerville, Mass., offices of GREY2K USA, which she founded in 2001.

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Several factors combined to turn Dorchak from a self-described “Miss Perfect,” a Type-A personality intent on “getting a PhD in French, being rich, and living in a mansion,” into a greyhound activist. She was always an animal lover: As an undergraduate at Boston University, she commuted 20 miles to school so that she could live with her beagle, Bunny, in a place that allowed pets.

But after the accident, Dorchak came to

Greyhound crusader



NICOLE HILL

believe the dog she had been walking that day, a Black Russian Terrier named Kelsey, had saved her for a specific purpose. Kelsey prevented her from being hit head-on by managing to pull her slightly out of the path of the oncoming train. The dog survived but broke her hip.

When Dorchak woke from a several-week coma, she felt preternaturally close to Kelsey. She began to question her life choices: “My priorities weren’t right. I decided that if I ever walked again, my life was going to be different. I was going to look beyond myself.”

Dorchak now even dates her age from the time of the accident: Although she’s 41, she considers herself 15. Since her transformation, which included struggling to regain her memory along with finding work in the animal-protection movement and, most recently, attending law school at night, Dorchak has been revered in the animal rights community.

GREY2K’s Mr. Thiel, who lives with Dorchak plus Zoe and four cats in an Arlington, Mass., apartment, describes her as “compassionate, stubborn, and incredibly sharp.” As he talks about the Boston marathons Dorchak has run since her accident, Thiel’s voice roughens with emotion. “She inspires me,” he says.

Virginia Fuller, past president of the New England Wildlife Center in Weymouth, Mass., says that even as animal rescue people go, Dorchak is atypically impassioned. “It’s the focus of her being,” says Ms. Fuller. “Christine is a force of nature.”

That people seem either to love her or hate her doesn’t matter to Dorchak. “I’m not on Wonderland’s Christmas card list,” she says

referring to the local racetrack. “That’s OK. What’s not OK is the tragedies that are happening at both [Massachusetts] tracks.”

At the heart of it are the greyhounds themselves – dogs with a long, illustrious, and often controversial history. One of the most ancient of canine breeds, greyhounds have lived among humans for thousands of years. They are the only canine mentioned by name in the Bible.

The Forest Laws, enacted in England in 1014 by King Canute, mandated that only nobility could own the greyhound, by then a celebrated hunting dog. Greyhounds were introduced to the US in the 1800s to control the jack rabbit population. Racing became popular as farmers started to stage competitions.

According to the Greyhound Racing Association of America, the sport reached its zenith in 1992, when attendance approached 3.5 million and nearly \$3.5 billion was bet at more than 50 tracks. Since then, revenue has dropped by nearly 50 percent. Many tracks have closed. Other forms of legal gambling have been the major issue, but pressure from animal rights groups has also been a factor.

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With heated rhetoric on both sides, determining the true state of conditions for working greyhounds isn’t easy. Even industry supporters acknowledge that the dogs are kept caged for long periods, sometimes as long as 20 hours per day, and suffer injuries on the racetrack – 728 since 2002 in Massachusetts, according to records released by the tracks. Critics also maintain that the animals are fed a substandard and potentially pathogenic diet of raw meat and that, despite an increase in

adoptions, too many greyhounds continue to be euthanized after their careers are over.

In recent years, Idaho, Maine, North Carolina, Nevada, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Pennsylvania all passed legislative bans on dog racing. Massachusetts remains one of only 13 states that still allows commercial dog racing. The initiative to ban it is being put forth by the Committee to Protect Dogs, of which GREY2K USA is a key member, along with other groups such as the Animal Rescue League of Boston.

Greyhound advocates got a similar measure on the ballot in 2000, but it lost by a slim margin. An effort to place the proposal on the 2006 ballot failed after a court ruled that the wording lacked clarity.

The group has until Nov. 21 to obtain signatures from 66,593 registered voters. A second round of 11,099 signatures is due in July

2008. It is a race that Dorchak – committed marathoner and crusader – is determined to win. “This time, we’re going to do it,” she says.

In an ironic twist that somehow suits the Dorchak story, the owner of the Raynham Park racetrack, George Carney, paid for her scholarship to law school several years ago. Dorchak says he initially seemed “amused and a little charmed” that the money he’d donated as a trustee of the New England School of Law had gone to support her. Mr. Carney himself acknowledges that he was onstage to hand Dorchak her diploma at graduation. He wishes her the best, he says.

Dorchak isn’t convinced. Over time Carney’s amusement has waned, she says, as he saw her career path: “He thought I was going to graduate and go make a lot of money and just go away.” Clearly, Carney did not know Dorchak well.

DOG ADVOCATE:

Christine Dorchak gathers signatures with her dog Zoe to put an initiative on the ballot that would ban greyhound racing in Massachusetts. She is the founder of GREY2K USA, an advocacy group for greyhounds.