

Column - Friday, December 16, 2005

Diablo Views: Santa Paws gets pets in holiday spirit

by Dolores Fox Ciardelli

Christmas photos are a tradition - usually tykes in holiday togs perched on Santa's lap. So when I heard about an event last Saturday at Bishop Ranch Veterinary Center to photograph pets for Christmas, I couldn't resist checking it out with my little Mickey. She's a miniature American Eskimo who's looking quite fluffy since the weather turned cold.

The Santa Paws happening began at 11 a.m. and we arrived shortly after that. I paid the \$18, of which \$5 goes to animal rescue groups, and filled out information for having the photo mailed. Then Mickey and I waited our turn. There were coffee and cookies, and all the dog owners admired each other's pets and chatted among themselves.

The Harris family was just leaving with 7-month-old Blazer, a Labradoodle, which is a charming mix between a Labrador retriever and a poodle. The golden pooch had just had his first trim, they informed me, and he was wearing a frilly Christmas collar. Ken and Pam said they had posed Blazer with their son Brett, 9, a student at San Ramon Valley Christian Academy.

Dusty Dennis was there with her lab husky mix. Twelve-year-old Katie is a cancer survivor, Dusty told me, and was just given a clean bill of health by her doggie oncologist after months of chemotherapy. After Katie's portrait was finished, Dusty stopped to tell me the photographers had made it a positive experience. She said when she had first adopted Katie from an animal shelter she had taken her for a photo with Santa. She recalled Katie's resistance and said when she finally settled stiffly on Santa's knee, her expression said, "You can take me back to the pound, just get me off this guy's lap."

Marti and Gene Stoegbaner waited with their stately golden retriever named Bentley, 6 months old. He had been at obedience class at the veterinary center and they proudly said he'd just advanced to Level II. Good news for the photographer!

Debbie and Paul Eyres soon arrived with their two little white Westies, short for West Highland terriers. Maggie, 4, was sedate with her freshly groomed tresses. But Bailey, only 8 months old, was jumping around with excitement. Debbie said they always get holiday photos to send to relatives in England and in New Jersey.

Soon my number was called and I met Lisa Hermes, a portrait photographer who specializes in dogs, children and families in natural settings. For this occasion she had a big supply of Christmas props, from Santa hats to scarves to baskets, bells and bows. She noted that it takes a pretty mellow dog to wear a Santa hat.

Lisa and her assistant Judith Peale and I decided on a very feminine green and red chiffon collar. Mickey immediately bonded with Judith, who was feeding her miniscule treats. They had set up a big canopy enclosed on two sides for a dark background and to control the light. Lisa said she usually works in late afternoon or evening, and bright daylight was a challenge. Judith placed Mickey on a little red armchair, and removed her collar and leash after I optimistically assured her Mickey knows how to "sit" and "stay." Lisa can edit out leashes on the computer but it's easier to take them off beforehand.

Mickey sat, mesmerized by the treat held high in Judith's fingers while Lisa crouched behind her camera waiting for the right moment. "Mickey, stay. Mickey, stay," Judith murmured soothingly as she backed away. But Mickey did not stay - she jumped off the little chair to run to Judith for the treat.

Judith patiently placed Mickey back on the chair and slowly backed away again. "Good girl," she said softly. "Good girl." Mickey stared at Judith, then glanced at Lisa and - snap! - Lisa got the perfect shot. Judith

quickly removed the props, put Mickey's leash back on, and we were ready to go. Lisa told me they had decided to do the Christmas portraits as a way to celebrate the season and to do good for animal rescue groups. The pet owners sure got a bargain: This was no quick Polaroid shot but a session with a professional portrait photographer. Lisa's work is displayed throughout the veterinary clinic - dogs sniffing flowers, a puppy peeking out of a bucket, another one running freely.

Now it was Maggie and Bailey's turn. After some discussion Judith wrapped matching red and white knitted scarves around their necks. Maggie sat placidly but Bailey was too excited to sit still, keeping everyone laughing until the Westies finally settled side-by-side just long enough for Lisa to snap the photo.

Next came a woman holding a cat carrier. Lisa and Judith both peeked inside making cooing noises. I decided a cat would be enough of a challenge without Mickey in the vicinity so we left. I know dogs aren't children but nonetheless I think I've started a new tradition in our family - a Christmas pet photo...at least until we have grandchildren.