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Inside Today

- [World](#)
- [National](#)
- [Local News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Editorial](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)
- [Spectrum](#)
- [Herod's Column](#)
- [Community Listings](#)
- [Do It!](#)
- [Lifestyles](#)
- [Garden & Home](#)
- [Business](#)
- [Religion](#)
- [Drive](#)
- [Health](#)
- [Diversions](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Obituaries](#)

7 Wonders

- [St. Catharines](#)
- [Thorold](#)
- [Niagara-on-the-Lake](#)
- [West Niagara](#)

Local Music Scene

- [Music Listings](#)

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- [Classified & Career Advertising](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [National/MultiMarket Advertising](#)
- [Retail Advertising](#)
- [Editorial Info](#)
- [New Subscriber Special](#)

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- [Homes](#)
- [Wheels](#)
- [Spectrum Flavours](#)
- [Summer Activity Guide](#)
- [Beautiful Yards](#)
- [Spotlight Niagara - Economic Overview](#)
- [Spotlight Niagara - Focus on Small Business](#)
- [Spotlight Niagara - Pictorial Profiles](#)
- [Spotlight Niagara - Milestones of 2006](#)
- [Your Child's Early](#)



Fannie is fitted with one of the masks donated by the St. Catharines and District Kennel and Obedience Club.; St. Catharines fire department Platoon Chief Danny O'Hearn demonstrates a snout-shaped oxygen mask Wednesday on Fannie, a five-year-old Australian shepherd. Staff photo by Julie Jocsak

Photo: Julie Jocsak

A breath of fresh air for pets

MARLENE BERGSMAN

Local News - Thursday, July 19, 2007 @ 01:00

Sometimes size does matter.

A Thorold woman's winter vacation has led to the Niagara debut of a safety device that can mean the difference between life and death for a cherished family pet.

St. Catharines firefighters are now equipped with snout-shaped masks they can use to deliver oxygen to animals suffering from smoke inhalation, thanks to a donation from the St. Catharines and District Kennel and Obedience Club.

Kennel club members Tom and Susan Lucas heard about the masks from their sister, Marguerite Lucas, who was vacationing in Florida when she read about the Fido-friendly plastic devices. They come in three sizes and can be used for dogs, cats and other companion animals, Susan said.

Tom described the masks at a meeting of the kennel club in April and a plan was hatched to raise enough money to donate three mask sets to every fire department in Niagara.

"We're all dog lovers and it made sense to us that if you can rescue the people, this also gives us an opportunity to rescue the pets, too," Susan said.

Fire department Platoon Chief Danny O'Hearn demonstrated the large mask Wednesday on Fannie, a five-year-old Australian shepherd owned by Virginia Hills, and the medium one on Simon, a 5 1/2-year-old border terrier owned by Gloria Mosley. Both dogs obeyed their owners' commands to co-operate with O'Hearn, who said animals seem to know when humans are trying to help.

O'Hearn has reason to believe in the usefulness of the masks.

In April 1997, he was at the scene of a house fire in north St. Catharines when he was

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handed the limp, towel-wrapped body of an unconscious cat, found in the basement of the smoke-filled house.

The animal lover felt a faint heartbeat and wasted no time, immediately beginning mouth-to-cat resuscitation, and saving Fanny the cat's life.

O'Hearn said firefighters' priority will always be rescuing people, but when there's a chance to save a pet's life, firefighters welcome the extra help of the muzzle-shaped masks.

In the past, they would use the oxygen masks provided for human victims, as O'Hearn did when one became available at Fanny's rescue. But the animal masks will fit much better over a snout, said Deputy Chief Ed LaJoie, who was pleased to learn of the kennel club's donation.

"It can be a battle to get the (human) mask to fit properly," LaJoie said. "This gives them much better coverage and a much better fit." The masks are long enough to fit a snout and have a flexible seal to deliver maximum oxygen to the animal.

"As you know, more and more households have pets," LaJoie said.

"And animals are like members of the family now," added Susan Lucas. Lucas said the kennel club buys the masks at cost from a non-profit animal assistance organization in Florida, on the condition that no profit is made when they are donated. A set of three costs about \$55, and the club wants to make a set available to every fire department in Niagara.

mbergama@stcatharinesstandard.ca

How you can help

The St. Catharines and District Kennel and Obedience Club will host its annual conformation show at the Beamsville Fairgrounds, Aug. 17 to 19.

Proceeds from a rally obedience match, to be held Aug. 18 as part of the show, will be used to buy animal oxygen masks to be donated to Niagara fire departments.

For more information, to register for the obedience match, to donate for masks, or to join the club, call Susan Lucas at 905-682-2002.

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