

Katrina Survivor Wins Custody of Dog

Separated by hurricane, Great Dane that found a new home returns to former owner.

A Great Dane that was sent to New Jersey in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is returning home, after a judge ruled that the dogs owner did not mean to abandon him when she placed him in a shelter, according to news reports.

Annabelle Arguello, 52, won back custody of Chopper following a mix-up that allowed a New Jersey couple to adopt the big black dog and rename him Pluto.

The couple, which had grown fond of the dog after adopting him, did not attend the court hearing because they feared having to give him up, according to attorney Christina Donahue.

It is a bittersweet decision the court has made, Somerset County Judge Rosemarie Williams stated in her ruling. The court believes it rightfully reunites a woman who has been through a terrible tragedy, the likes of which few other Americans have had the misfortune to experience.

A week after Hurricane Katrina damaged her home in Kenner, La., Arguello took Chopper and her two Beagles to the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center, where an animal rescue site had been set up, according to the New Orleans Times-Picayune. Arguello, who would be staying with her sister in Houston, wrote on the shelters form that she was sending them there temporarily, and she would return for them before an Oct. 15 deadline.

But the rescue site became overwhelmed, and People for Animals in New Jersey was one of several animal groups that offered to house lost pets.

When Arguello returned for the dogs in late September, nobody could locate the Great Dane. It was not until November that the combined efforts of several organization tracked Chopper to New Jersey, by which time the October deadline had passed and the dog had been adopted by Pam Behnke.

Behnke did not want relinquish the dog she called Pluto, and argued that he had become a member of her family after Arguello abandoned him.

Posted: Feb. 2, 2006, 3 p.m. EST