

## In Napa, Christmas photos with Santa are for pets, too

Dec 9, 2018 Updated 13 hrs ago

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One of the first portraits taken with Santa and Mrs. Claus at Sunday's pet photo shoot in Napa featured 9-year-old Ryan Kirkpatrick and a pair of year-old dogs, Rosie the basset hound and Rocco, a Maltese-poodle mix.

Howard Yune, Register

Family members posing for a picture with Santa Claus are a staple of Christmas season, and one such photo shoot Sunday in Napa was no different – except these family members had fur and four legs.

Bel Aire Plaza hosted a three-hour session to capture holiday mementos of dogs, cats and their human companions in a distinctive spin on the familiar snapshots of small children on Saint Nick’s lap. The event was a fundraiser for the Jameson Animal Rescue Ranch’s no-kill rescue and sanctuary program – as well as a way for Napans to show affection for pets they treat almost as closely as kin.

“They’re just as much my babies as my Ryan is, and I’d rather hang out with pets all day than people,” said Kylie Kirkpatrick as her furry and human family – son Ryan, 9, and their year-old basset hound Rose and Maltese-poodle mix Rocco – took their places around Santa and Mrs. Claus around a backdrop of decked trees and wrapped presents.

A joint effort of JARR, Bel Aire and the Heritage Eats restaurant, the furry holiday photo shoot took place on the same patio that had hosted a traditional kids-with-Kriss Kringle gathering the day before.

The screeching or sobbing of frightened toddlers at the sight of an unfamiliar bearded man might have been absent, but this version of a photo shoot carried its own challenges. “They’re overexcited,” admitted Susan Needleman, a JARR volunteer and the event photographer. “There’s a lot going on in every direction, so just getting them to sit still is a challenge. We just try to give them a minute or so to hopefully calm down.”

As Needleman prepared to press the shutter button for each portrait, an assistant stood to her left, each hand holding aloft a ball- or bone-shaped squeak toy – its noise, with luck, capturing a dog’s attention for a few

seconds before it yanked at its leash or spun dervish-like completely out of the frame.

Some lap dogs or house cats curled peacefully in the lap of an owner or Mrs. Claus, dutifully posing for the camera. On the other hand, Dodger, a 4-year-old dark-furred poodle mix, lasted 30 seconds before dashing off the studio, his leash knocking down a velvet rope.

“He’s super crazy; he’s always been a little crazy,” admitted Dodger’s owner Shelby Higginbotham after she apologized profusely to some volunteers. “My boyfriend saw this event in the paper and thought it would be a good idea. We were thinking we could give him the benefit of the doubt,” she added, laughing.

Just outside the patio, another woman waited her turn with more confidence, even remembering her canine’s rambunctious youth.

“He’s OK – he plays well with other dogs,” Wahu Oseso of Napa said of her 2-year-old golden retriever Bentley.

Oseso’s four children all had posed with Saint Nick in their younger years, but she was ready to make room for a kid photo of another sort. “I think it’ll be a surprise for them,” she said with a laugh.

For other pet owners, Sunday was a time to capture memories of a bond as well as a season.

Trudee Lewis arrived for the photo session with what appeared to be a nylon bag, but the pulling of a zipper revealed Declan – the cat she had rescued through JARR just three weeks earlier. After Declan’s turn before the camera

in Mrs. Claus's gloved hands, his owner expressed a sentiment that could have been born of years rather than days of companionship.

"He walked right up to me and purred and said, 'Here I am,'" Lewis said.