

### Harry Nelson rescues dogs, but his neighbors think he abuses them



Jesús, a stocky hound mixed with a Shar-Pei and Rhodesian ridgeback, sits calmly on the stone driveway of owner Harry Sickle Nelson's five-bedroom home in Miami's gated Morningside neighborhood. As his dog gets up to greet him, the 60-year-old gardener waves goodbye to a chubby, bald investigator from Miami-Dade Animal Services who was checking in on Jesús and six other pooches Nelson has been housing inside his home's stucco two-car garage.

On the morning of January 26, for the second time in three days, the investigator wrote Nelson a citation for exceeding the county's limit of four dogs per household, and operating a kennel without a license. Nelson, a raspy-voiced man with spiky blond hair and intense hazel eyes, had whittled the number of canines from two dozen down to seven, but he told the investigator he needed a few more days to find new homes for three dogs. Jesús and three of his furry pals will remain with Nelson.

"Yes, I had an exorbitant number of dogs," Nelson tells *Biscayne Times*. "For that I apologize. But my neighbors could have tried to talk to me instead of calling the cops and animal control."

It's a recurring scene that's played out on the corner of NE 59th Street and NE 6th Avenue for at least seven years -- between Nelson and some Morningside residents who've been unsuccessful in shutting down his makeshift dog rescue operation and forcing him to tidy up his front and back yards.

Since 2011, Miami-Dade Animal Services has responded to 15 complaints about Nelson abusing dogs on his property, which is in a rundown state and littered with empty metal animal

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pens. Neighbors have also repeatedly brought their grievances to Miami's Upper Eastside Neighborhood Enhancement Team and the Miami Code Enforcement Board, which last year slapped a lien on Nelson's house, which is owned by his 90-year-old father in Pennsylvania.

According to the document, the Nelsons have not provided the city with proof that they rectified eight violations -- including illegal operation of a business in a residential zone and failing to maintain the property in a clean, safe condition -- issued three years ago. Since July 22, 2013, Nelson has been racking up daily fines of \$1000.



Gelcys Vasquez, a hotel concierge who has lived in Morningside for 20 years, is among the neighbors who've sent numerous e-mails and called authorities to complain about Nelson.

"I knew something strange was going on with that house because of the terrible smell and the nonstop barking," Vasquez says. "It's very frustrating when you see television reports showing police officers and animal control taking horses that weren't being fed in Homestead, but they don't do anything about 24 abused dogs in the middle of Morningside."

Vasquez, along with two other Morningside residents interviewed by the *BT*, claims that Nelson is hardly ever home and that his dogs are left cooped up inside the garage for most of the day. "They're alone in a property that has essentially been abandoned," Vasquez says. "I've been pursuing this for two years, and nothing is done about it."

Nelson counters that he regularly checks on the dogs, even though he puts in long workdays. "I wash their pens and feed them three times a day," he says. "My dogs are beautiful, well

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behaved, well fed, and kept clean. That's why Animal Services has never taken them from me."

A landscape artist who designed the lush grounds of Gianni Versace's Ocean Drive mansion, Nelson is no stranger to controversy. He's been a defendant in at least six lawsuits since 1988 that accuse him of stiffing suppliers, subcontractors, and vendors. For example, Larry's Cap Rock & Stone sued him for \$30,375 in 2008 over a bounced check. The lawsuit was privately settled.

In the early 2000s, Nelson's neighbors protested outside his gate after he turned his family's property into a construction site without permits, and the city fined him \$500 a day for illegal renovations. And in 2010, he antagonized residents and commercial tenants of Midtown Miami when his promise to transform 2.5 vacant acres into a green oasis became a gigantic landscaping nightmare.

According to a June 2010 *BT* article, "How Does Your Garden Grow?" Nelson's World Gardens project was festooned with potted tangles of trees and shrubs, large mounds of dirt ranging in color, irrigation hoses snaking across the property lines, mud patches, and scattered equipment. A year later the development's owner, Midtown Equities, announced it was cutting ties with Nelson and scrapping his project.



While Nelson's interactions with humans seem fraught with conflict, he definitely has a soft spot for man's best friend. He tells the *BT* he has rescued about 40 dogs in the past ten years and

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has worked with local animal rescue groups to find homes for about half of them. Of the 24 dogs Animal Services recently catalogued at his property, 12 were rescued shortly after Hurricane Irma, Nelson says.

“If people took care of their dogs and didn’t abandon them, I wouldn’t be putting them up in my home,” he adds. “If I see a dog running in the street, I’ll pick it up. In the past year, I’ve found homes for 20 dogs with the help of a rescue group.”

His latest run-in with his neighbors began in May 2017, when attorney Michael Puchades moved into the five-bedroom house next door. On the Saturday afternoon before Animal Services came to inspect Nelson’s property, Puchades tells the *BT*, he tried to speak with his neighbor about the dogs. “I approached him in a friendly, nice way and tried to break the ice by inquiring if he’d be interested in designing my landscaping,” Puchades says. “I slipped in the issue about the dogs and the noise being unbearable, especially when he’s leaving. But I couldn’t get anywhere with him.”

Out by his pool, a pungent smell of urine, excrement, and wet dog fur emanated from the garage next door, which is visible from Puchades’s backyard. During a 90-minute period, the dogs barked incessantly. “That cacophony will sometimes last for hours until Harry comes home,” Puchades says. “He’s been getting away with it for so many years that people get tired of complaining.”

About a month after moving in, Puchades says, he reported Nelson to Animal Services, but when the inspector showed up, he didn’t enter the property and only spoke to Nelson outside the gate, Puchades alleges. “Apparently a homeowner has to provide consent for the investigator to go in,” he says. “He keeps the dogs locked up. I’ve never seen them outside playing.”

Nelson claims Puchades is going after the dogs to discredit him because he’s witnessed his neighbor perform illegal construction and chop down protected trees. “Everything is being pushed by my lawyer neighbor,” Nelson says. “He’s trying to intimidate me from turning him in to the city.”

In late December, another Morningside resident, Pamela Boudreaux said she was walking by

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Nelson's house when she heard the dogs barking. "It sounded like the animals were in distress," she says. "I called 311 to complain, and the operator told me that there'd been five other complaints about his dogs."



Over the past month, an unidentified neighbor circulated photos and a video of Nelson's backyard that show the empty animal pens except for one that contained a cat. In the 1:15-minute video, the piercing sound of dogs barking lasts for the entire duration of the clip. After seeing the images and the footage, Boudreaux again called Animal Services.

This time, she was present when the inspector showed up at Nelson's property on January 23. Boudreaux claims Nelson was also there and threatened her. She called 911 and three Miami police squad cars responded to the property. A *BT* reporter was there at the tail end of the inspection, when the investigator informed Boudreaux and Vasquez, who also showed up, that Nelson had agreed to give up eight dogs to Animal Services, but that he would place 12 others with animal rescue groups.

Boudreaux and Vasquez were dumbfounded to learn that the inspector wouldn't be able to take all 24 dogs since he did issue Nelson a \$250 citation for operating a kennel without a license and having more dogs than the county allows.

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“He’s only allowed to have four dogs and they only took eight, so he’s still in violation,” Vasquez says. “Yet the inspector says he’d need a warrant to confiscate the dogs. My brain can’t wrap around that.”

Boudreaux can’t understand why animals being kept alone in pens for hours at a time inside an air-conditioned garage didn’t constitute animal cruelty. “He was cited for having too many dogs, but nothing about being abusive or neglectful,” she says. “He doesn’t take these fines seriously.”

Animal Services spokeswoman Lillian Bohorquez tells the *BT* that the investigator found all 24 dogs to be healthy and in good physical condition. Under county law, dogs are considered personal property, so Animal Services can’t seize them without evidence that they’re being mistreated. “These dogs had food and water,” she relates. “And their cages were being kept clean.”

Furthermore, Nelson is cooperating with Animal Services by giving up 20 dogs. “He allowed us to take eight dogs, and he’s now down to seven from the 16 that were left,” Bohorquez says. “We issued him another citation for having an excess number of dogs, but he’s working on removing them.”

Nelson says his neighbors actually did him a favor, despite his soft spot for dogs. “In the past year, my life has been ripped upside down,” he says. “My mother died. My sister died. My business was negatively impacted by Hurricane Irma. They’re actually making my life easier.”

Nelson grabs Jesús by the spiked black dog collar and guides the canine back to the garage.

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