

Two teens arrested in cruelty case

By MATT ELLIOTT, Staff Writer - *Tulsa World*

7/3/2004

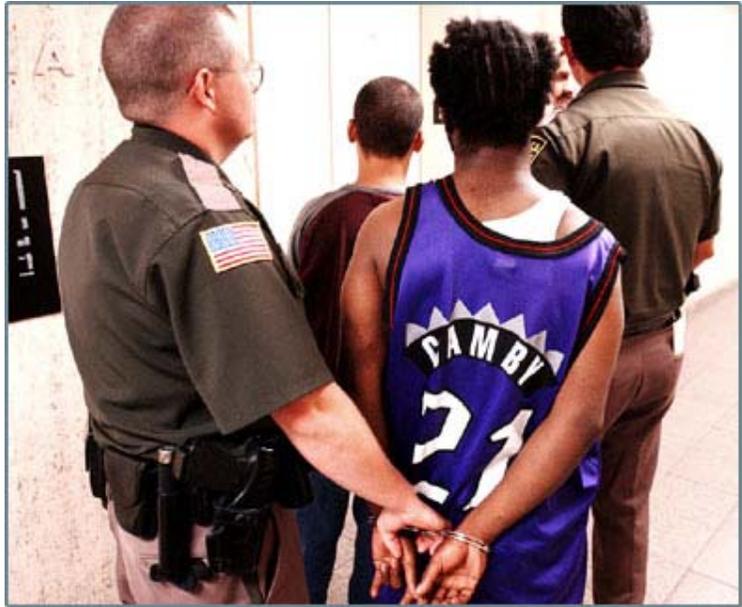
SOURCE: http://www.tulsaworld.com/NewsStory.asp?ID=040703_Ne_A1_Twote18570

Police say they admitted setting a dog on fire, but they denied involvement in the alleged firecracker killings of puppies.

Two Tulsa fraud detectives who were acting on a Crime Stoppers tip arrested two teenagers Friday in connection with an animal cruelty case that horrified the nation.

During questioning, the two allegedly told police that they caught the black Labrador retriever-mix puppy, doused its back with lighter fluid and set it on fire, Sgt. Tony Cellino said.

However, they denied having anything to do with the alleged firecracker killings of six other puppies, and investigators have been unable to verify that those killings occurred.



Cellino and Cpl. Chris Stout were near Tulsa International Airport around noon Friday when they received a tip that led to the arrests of the two boys, one 14 and the other 16, Cellino said.

Officers began investigating the abuse Monday when a woman brought the 4 1/2-month-old puppy, suffering from severe burns to her hindquarters, and a second dog to the Tulsa Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' office at 2910 Mohawk Boulevard.

She reportedly told animal control investigators that she heard a dog barking and found the Lab puppy in the area of Peoria Avenue and 62nd Street North. At a vacant house across the street, she saw a mother dog, allegedly with six dead puppies, she said.

At least one looked like it had been killed with fireworks, Larry Briggs, the city's Animal Shelter director, said the woman told investigators. However, their bodies have not been found, nor did investigators find any evidence of such a crime at the scene, Briggs said.

Officials said earlier this week that the six puppies had been blown apart by firecrackers.

Laurie Mayes, executive director of the Tulsa SPCA, said Monday that the woman told workers that the mother dog "was found sitting with them (the dead puppies) and . . . encouraging them to get up."

The two boys "were questioned with regard to the puppies, and they deny any involvement in that particular side of the investigation," Briggs said. "That strengthens our theory that we've actually got two different crimes that are not connected."

Investigators, who interviewed the woman who reported the abuse, do not discount her story about the puppies, Briggs said.

"We don't have any information to disprove or prove our complainant's story," Briggs said.

But investigators canvassing the neighborhood found the owner of the mother dog, who told them that the dead puppies could not have belonged to her dog, who was not physically harmed in the attacks.

"(The owner) tells us that her dog had 11 pups about a month ago" and that two of her offspring were still at the owner's home, Briggs said. The rest were given away.

Investigators also uncovered a witness who claimed to have seen a dog on fire about 3 a.m. Sunday but not to have seen who did it, Briggs said.

Authorities are still investigating the abuse, he said.

"Credit goes to Tony Cellino and Chris Stout for followup on the Crime Stoppers tip this afternoon," Briggs said.

The two detectives, who normally investigate forgery and fraud-related crimes, tracked the teenagers to their homes. They brought the juveniles to the Detective Division for questioning downtown with their mothers, Cellino said.

The two juveniles each were jailed on one felony complaint of animal cruelty. They will remain in custody until a hearing Tuesday, Cellino said.

Information from the Crime Stoppers tip and help from an anonymous business owner led him and Stout to the teenagers, the sergeant said.

After national publicity about the fireworks incident, an \$18,000 reward has been collected to find who abused the dogs.

It was not clear Friday how the reward money would be disbursed after the arrests.

Anyone with information on the puppies' deaths is asked to call Crime Stoppers at 596-COPS.

The Citizens Crime Commission pays cash rewards for information leading to the arrest of people who are charged with crimes. Callers can be anonymous.

Donations for the care of the surviving dogs or other abused animals can be made to the Tulsa SPCA at 428-7722, or online at www.tulsaspca.org.