

Woman Arrested for Helping Kill More Than 2,000 Greyhounds Is Training Dogs in Florida Again

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Authorities found the bodies of more than 2,000 greyhounds buried on an 18-acre property. Most had gun shot wounds in the head and neck.

A woman arrested on felony charges for helping kill more than 2,000 greyhounds from all over the state has been training racing dogs again in Florida as recently as last week.

Ursula O'Donnell was charged with felony animal cruelty in November 2002 after allegedly hiring an Alabama man to shoot and bury greyhounds under her care.

According to documents obtained by the Juice, O'Donnell allegedly sent dogs from as far away as Palm Beach and Orlando to Robert Rhodes, a security guard at the Pensacola dog track, who told police he shot the greyhounds for about \$10 each. When Rhodes died before trial, the case was dropped.

After the jump, more about O'Donnell, what the track did when notified of the investigation, and a photo of the massive greyhound graveyard uncovered just across state lines. (WARNING: The photo is

graphic and potentially disturbing.)

When police officers discovered the scene in Baldwin County, Alabama, many were overcome. For more than 20 years, Rhodes crassly (and illegally) disposed of greyhounds that were no longer fast enough to compete on the track by shooting them with a .22-caliber pistol. He told investigators at the time that he always killed the animals with a single shot to the back of the head so "they never knew it was coming." But many of the bodies uncovered on Rhodes' property had been shot in the snout or the neck.

Though O'Donnell denied knowledge of the operation at the time -- she claimed her employees sent dogs to Rhodes without her knowing -- a criminal investigation by the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation found a check written by O'Donnell to Rhodes for \$230, dated just before Rhodes' arrest. Using Rhodes' standard pricing, that was the fee for the execution of 23 dogs.

This is a picture taken of the greyhound graveyard as it was unearthed.



Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, Division of pari-mutuel wagering

You'd think such a thing would preclude an individual from working with greyhounds ever again, but as of the start of this year, O'Donnell was listed as the "trainer of record" for Free Spirit Kennel, which races dogs at the Naples-Fort Myers Track and Entertainment Center. That means that O'Donnell is personally responsible for the welfare of 50 to 75 dogs.

Then, around January 10, about the same time the track was notified about a current investigation, Ursula was no longer listed as the trainer of record for Free Spirit Kennel.

The Naples track is owned by the Miami-based Havenick family, which also owns Magic City Casino in Miami (formerly the Flagler dog track). Izzy Havenick, vice president of both tracks, told me that as soon as he and his brother learned of O'Donnell's background, they asked the kennel to replace her.

"This was just brought to our attention," Havenick said. "She never worked for us in any way, shape, or form. All of the kennels are owned and operated completely independently. But as soon as we found out, we asked the kennel to make the change, and they did."

Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K, the national antiracing lobby, told me the organization is pleased that Ursula O'Donnell will no longer be doing business with these two dog tracks.

"The Havenick family should be applauded for doing the right thing in asking Ursula O'Donnell to step down," Theil said. "We are grateful for their decision. The National Greyhound Association claims that they police their industry effectively, but this incident proves otherwise. The fact that Ursula was allowed to work again in the greyhound racing industry is very troubling."

Havenick says he was as surprised as anyone to hear of Ursula's past, since she was properly licensed with the state. "We would never allow anyone who is even questionably cruel to a dog to be associated with our properties," he said. "If you get a license from the state, we assume the state has checked you out."

He added: "We are dog guys. We love the dogs as much as anyone. We like dogs more than people."

UPDATE: Read the National Greyhound Association's statement on the matter [here](#).