

PI Jamie Katz Lost and Found Pets

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Held for ransom and against his will for 48 days... Choco is now SAFE & HOME!!! Here is Choco's story.

I'd like to thank everyone for being so patient for me to write my story. Before I lost Choco, it was my plan to take him on a road trip to Michigan to spend time with my boyfriend for the entire summer because I knew how much Choco would love the scenery up here. And I am beyond fortunate to discover that I was right.

April 10, Sunday at 7PM I let Choco into my backyard to use the bathroom as I have done for 9 years. I would open the door, let him out, either stay with him or go back inside – it never really mattered because within 10 minutes Choco's nose would always open the house door again. Although this time that wasn't the case. My boyfriend's friends passed by which distracted me for about 15-20 minutes. When they left, I realized Choco hadn't come back yet so I went outside to see what he must have gotten himself into.

I whistled and called every 5 minutes until 7:45 hit and I jumped in my car circling the neighborhood to find him in order to scold him. But he was nowhere to be found and that is when I knew something wasn't right.

From that moment everything in my life escalated pretty quickly. Whether it was because I was putting up paper flyers, searching the streets looking for my dog's corpse, answering scammer phone calls of heartless people claiming to have my dog and wanting money but then being unable to produce photos, not being able to pay attention in school or simply crying because my entire life was thrown out of order with Choco gone.

Someone from Craigslist then called me and told me to join a Facebook group "Lost Dogs of Broward and Dade County." This is where I was told to contact Jamie Katz, Pet Private Investigator for her assistance with launching a sign campaign and potential use of her tracking dogs.

Even though I had school, I had to put that aside for my best friend. I decided that I'm going to become a lawyer regardless of what grade I received in Family Law. And it was that moment that I decided to hire Jamie that the search took off.

By putting lost dog posters where Jamie had strategically mapped out, my cell phone began to ring off the hook with sightings. With the help of Jamie's tracking dogs, we were able to confirm the validity of some neighbor's sightings of where they had seen Choco being walked and transported by a tall black male.

Then on April 14th we received our first strong lead, which although deceitful, eventually led to Choco. From a burner phone I was sent a photo of Choco in a kennel and told that I had to send \$750 via Western Union in order for the person who desired to remain anonymous to send Choco's location. I chose to put some faith in the person and send the money. Besides without sending money there would be no criminal charge initiated! As well, in order to pick up the money, the person had to give me a name and address.

Unfortunately, upon sending the money, the criminal had disconnected their phone. But because I sent the money, one very special deputy, who wishes to remain anonymous, chose never to give up on my search for Choco. This animal loving deputy knocked on multiple doors each day. Whatever leads Jamie and I would provide, she would go investigate no matter how dangerous. She called Jamie and I every single day, including weekends, asking for updates and giving instructions. She pulled the footage from the Western Union pick up and subpoenaed for more information. She treated this case as if Choco was her very own.

As she was doing this, Jamie and I were doing our own inside investigations on the name we were given for the Western Union pickup. We had internal connections and were told that the people involved were aware that there was a police officer on the case who was knocking on doors. To us, this meant, our deputy knocked on the correct door and although having been lied to, alerted the culprits that they were being tracked down.

A month went by of chasing down leads and talking to literally thousands of people. My social media campaign grew and so did my popularity regarding the issue within my neighborhood and surrounding neighborhoods. There was not a person who would pass me by who I wouldn't tell the story to. I would feed the names of the people I learned were connected to the taking of Choco to try and find more connections and sympathy for the ultimate fact of why the entire thing did not make sense: why did these people still want my dog after receiving \$750, and not the full \$2,000 reward?

On May 21st I was told by a mutual "friend" (as well as my first suspect the moment I couldn't find Choco on April 10th) that they were able to get in contact with the person who had Choco. Supposedly the person who sold my dog was by the same people involved in the Western Union pick up. This mutual "friend" then sent me a video of Choco which was supposedly was sent to him by the person who had him. In the video the man says "2 bands right here"

(2 bands meaning \$2,000 cash) and then somehow got Choco to bark. I was told that the man was nervous and did not believe that I had the money to give him. He then asked me to send a photo of the cash next to my phone. Upon sending the photo, around midnight I was told that the man wanted me to meet him at a gas station in an area I was unfamiliar with and 30 minutes away. I declined because of the obvious dangers of walking into that neighborhood at that time of night.

Then I was told that I had not received any more messages because I didn't meet up with the man at the gas station so the man was now scared and he stopped answering his phone calls.

During that week, my goal was to continue spreading awareness because Jamie and I felt that we were so close to an answer. I was fortunate enough to get in contact with various local news channels. Erica Rakow Reynolds of Channel 10, who was a year above me in the same high school, was the first to actually show up when she said she would and did a wonderful story to help which boosted social media views. Then the Miami Hispanic community lent a helping hand, and Diana Montañó from America Teve did another fabulous story to spread awareness.

Oddly enough, two days after I spoke to news channels and began paying Facebook advertisements to boost the posts which generated nearly 6,000 views and shares, the mutual "friend" contacted me again. He told me he would try to set up the "exchange" again. Couple minutes later, I received his text message that said "30 minutes. Same spot." It was then I put my foot down and said, we don't jump when you say jump. I'll be there in 2-3 hours when I have gathered my friends to accompany me. Although, while my friends and I were getting ourselves together, Jamie was already there at the location two hours before meeting time in order to wait and scope out the scene. She patiently began to analyze the how, what, where, when and hopefully the who of who we would be meeting.

Two hours later, my two friends and I arrived at the spot & met the mutual "friend" who had direct contact with the individual over his cell phone. He said that the man now wanted us to meet down his block down a dead end street. I was frustrated, reluctant, and did not want to go because I felt like it was a trap. So my friend decided to go with the mutual "friend" to scope out the block. My friend returned and told me that he felt it was safe for us to head down there. In preparation for anything to go wrong down that project building block, we reversed the car into the dead end street, and proceeded to walk with the mutual "friend" to where the man holding Choco was.

We were then surrounded by friends and neighbors of this individual when he walked outside of the courtyard area of the building. He did not walk from any specific apartment, or area, and for all I know he did not even live there and that was just a meeting spot.

The tall, black male with dreads walked out with a skeletal dog who I could not even recognize. But upon closer look I saw that it was my Choco even though my Choco, being so incredibly famished, did not recognize me. I then crouched down to check for identifiable markings on him, and confirmed that he was mine. The large man maintained a firm grip on Choco's collar and would not let go, which is when I went finger by finger forcing his grip from Choco's collar and angrily said "did you ever even think about feeding him?," which was when the man held his hand out for the reward. I then walked to the car with Choco, and picked up what used to be my 63 pound immovable dog that was now 45 pounds of bones who fit within my petite lap.

My friends and I drove off, with the mutual "friend" in our car as well where we were going to drop him back off at McDonalds. The mutual "friend" went to hug me, and I didn't return the hug. We then said our goodbyes. My friends bought Choco some chicken nuggets before we got into Jamie's SUV. Jamie and I were able to give Choco more food and water, call the deputy, and Channel 10 about the amazing news.

Some people may ask why I didn't call the police to accompany me to that scene and my answer is simple. The individuals who took Choco are not like you and I. These people do not use their real names and they do not remain "on the grid." Every day of their life consists of selling drugs, scamming, and hurting people to pay for their next meal. Had I shown up with the police, the whole neighborhood would have been notified and the man who had Choco would have run or come up with another nonsense story among of the million that I was fed the entire two months. These people prey on the innocent, and when they see a situation that they consider weak, they take it.

I had contacted the police before this pick up to accompany me to different scammers to get information, and the police presence would simply scare people away and not help gather answers. Then the police wouldn't do what you would hope they would such as take the person in and ask them questions which demanded answers. The police have to work around certain protocol and gather evidence before accusing people, which by our system protects people's fundamental rights to privacy. That's why it was up to Jamie and I to do what we had to do.

Some people also ask me why I paid these scammers. Another answer which is simple. These people know who I am, and where I live. If I know so much about them, I guarantee you they did some homework as well. I gave them my word that I just wanted my dog back, and I kept that word as to be free from future danger. My dog is home with me, and I'm happy to say it's over. It is unfortunate that people like this exist but that is the world we live in. Although unfortunate, the reality is that some people are simply out here trying to survive. It forces us to remember not to take

our loved ones for granted, and to always be careful because not everyone is in a positive position to give and not take.

For other dog owners out there who look at their dog as a family member and not property – please keep in mind that not everyone feels the same. Always keep an eye on your loved ones because you never know when you have to fight to get them back. But I will tell you this, the reward of having my baby home is like no other. I have my friends and family to thank for all the support throughout the way. Had Jamie and I stopped looking, my Choco would have died starving, and died waiting for his owner to come save him. This ordeal is something that Choco and I will never forget, and something that I will never regret. Thank you to everyone who helped us throughout our journey. We are one of the few lucky ones who had a happy ending. .

- Natalie in North Miami, FL