

South Florida private eye recovers missing animals



In the 1994 comedy movie *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, actor Jim Carrey portrays a Miami P.I. whose specialty is tracking down stolen animals. His quirky, birdlike movements, cloak-and-dagger snooping, and “alrighty then” catchphrase get him laughed at; but as eccentric as he is, in the end, Ventura completes his mission of recovering the Miami Dolphins’ beloved mascot. The film character’s popularity made Carrey a box-office darling and led to a sequel, a spin-off, and a cartoon television series.

Like Jim Carrey’s character, real-life South Florida pet detective Jamie Katz isn’t always taken seriously at first.

Katz majored in criminal justice while living in Baltimore and earned her CC Private Investigator license as an intern. But in May 2014, she suddenly had two new personal goals when a friend’s cat went missing and the hired tracking dogs never showed up to help in the search.

“For three days my friend and I waited for this company to come and save the day,” recalls Katz, “and it was such a disappointment.” Eventually the cat was found by a neighbor.

Real-Life Pet Detective

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Katz now knew what she had to do. “One, I needed to help all these people who this company was scamming. Second, I needed to find out if tracking dogs that find other animals are real.”

In July 2014, she started working for a firm where she specialized in the recovery of lost, missing, and stolen pets, playing what she believes to be a key role in the safe return of 90-plus pets. Then in September 2015, she opened P.I. Jamie Katz, her own licensed private investigation agency based in South Florida.

When asked if pet recovery combines her two loves of investigative work and animals, her answer is unwavering: “Yes, 100 percent. I’ve been active in animal rescue since I was a teenager, and my goal was to put animals and investigations together.”

There are downsides to the job, one being the amount of travel involved. “In the last year, I put 32,000 miles on my truck!” says Katz. “I’ve worked cases all over, from New York to Nebraska to Alabama to Pennsylvania. I’m now focusing on staying local -- and all of Florida is local, in my head.”

Once hired, she develops a plan of action for every case. Her first step is to profile, creating a “who-what-where-when-and-why” outline to follow.

“Step two is signs, signs, signs,” she says. “Signs are how I get the animals home. I design the sign, map out where each and every sign needs to be placed, and my clients just have to follow my instructions. I make this very easy, and I’m there for them every step of the way.”

Katz says that when people lose a pet, they’re often frantic. It’s her job to do the thinking for them. “I tell them what to do next as the sightings come in,” she explains.

Sometimes the next step is to bring in the tracking dogs, although Katz doesn’t think that’s always necessary.

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“The dogs are amazing, but they are not miracles,” she says. “If a client’s dog is roaming, my tracking dogs can’t lasso him down and bring him home. I want clients to have realistic expectations about what my tracking dogs do. The dogs tell me where we have scent of the missing animal in order to move forward with our search.”

In one such search for a missing husky mix, Katz used her tracking K-9s, Fletcher and Gable. They picked up the husky’s scent at the front door of a shelter, but shelter records didn’t show him going through the routine intake process. At first, shelter staffers were skeptical of her tracking dogs’ abilities, until she demonstrated for them just how her dogs work.

She gave each tracker the scent of an animal that had never been in the state before -- a negative scent -- and each dog failed to indicate that scent’s presence at the shelter entrance. When given the scent of the correct animal, each dog confirmed its existence at that same entrance.

The following day it was discovered that the husky had been given to a foster family without first being properly processed through intake. Persistence paid off, and Katz’s clients were soon reunited with their lost pet. It also earned Katz some much-deserved respect.

“It’s the most amazing feeling in the world when my client tells me that their animal is home,” she says. “To know that I helped bring a family back together, that I’m part of the reason they can live a normal life again -- there’s nothing better. People always ask, ‘What would you do if you had millions of dollars and didn’t need to work?’ This is it for sure.”

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