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Officers on Alert for Animals Being Sold Illegally in L.A.'s Fashion District

by Carla Hall



It's springtime and there's a bumper crop of unweaned animals being sold illegally on the sidewalks of L.A.'s downtown fashion district.

Los Angeles police Officer Matthew Shafer, who patrols the streets and lots around the Santee Alley shopping mecca, was routinely scouring a Wall Street parking garage on Easter Sunday when he spied a man rustling plastic in a van and went to investigate.

In the van, Shafer found 118 turtles. In another van next to it, he discovered 23 underage rabbits.

"I thought, 'Getting bunnies on Easter -- this is awesome,'" said Shafer who had arrested another illegal sidewalk vendor selling rabbits and turtles the previous weekend on 12th Street and Maple Avenue.

Counterfeit handbags and DVDs are not the only problems for police downtown. The illegal sale of animals -- often unweaned and malnourished or sick -- is a perennial problem, according to Los Angeles police, downtown security officers and the city's animal service officials.

When animal services officials can certify that animals are in bad condition, their vendors can be charged with animal cruelty -- as was Raymundo Hernandez, the man Shafer arrested in the parking garage.

The animals were confiscated and turned over to Lejla Hadzimuratovic, a rabbit rescuer who runs an organization called Bunny World Foundation.

Vendors who are arrested generally are back on the street dodging officers shortly afterward, said Shafer, who energetically pursues them nonetheless.

"Sometimes, it's hit or miss," Shafer said of the search for vendors and their animal wares. "It's like fishing."

Shafer and the yellow-shirted fashion district security officers are practically heroes in the eyes of animal rescuers.

Hadzimuratovic takes on the task of nursing the tiny rabbits -- often just days old -- with a mixture of kitten formula, goat milk and colostrum pills. If they live -- and sometimes they don't -- she and volunteers work to keep them all fed and cared for until she can adopt them out.

In the last 10 days, she has taken in about 40 of the furry creatures. The unweaned rabbits that officials confiscated more than a week ago and turned over to her have survived.

“All seven buns are alive and kicking,” she said.