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Photo By Eric Kayne

Gloria Medina Zenteno, with Apache, is the founder of Barrio Dogs of Houston, which promotes spay/neuter and pet care education.

After **Gloria Medina Zenteno** and her husband bought a house in the East End, where they grew up, she started noticing an abundance of neglected dogs around their new home.

"All the mangy dogs, pregnant moms, chained-up dogs. I have photos. I take photos on a daily basis. I've witnessed dogs running through the streets with chains on them. It's just not right," Zenteno said.

Zenteno, who did not own a dog when she moved back seven years ago, took action. She joined animal rescue groups to get the dogs veterinary care and new homes. She decided, however, that picking up strays didn't make a dent in the problem.

"I found out really quickly in rescue that it was just a never-ending thing. All the rescue groups are tapped out," Zenteno said. "There are just not enough homes for all the animals that we have.

"So I started thinking right away: How can we get to the root of the problem?"

Zenteno was dreaming big but starting small when she founded Barrio Dogs of Houston a year ago. The

nonprofit organization sends volunteers to schools to talk about pet care and responsibility and assists low-income residents who want to improve their animals' quality of life, which can include providing free fences. Zenteno envisions a resource center to help people find low-cost spay and neuter programs and regular veterinarians.

"One of our really important programs is called the Barrio Watch Dog program where we try to really encourage the residents to report animal abuse and neglect — chained-up dogs, animals that are left in cages and pens," she said. "People in our area just think that's the norm. And they don't really take responsibility in reporting. I think it's vital that we get law enforcement involved, because if we don't, then people are going to continue to do this."

Precinct 6 Constable **Victor Trevino**, who says stray dogs are an ongoing problem, applauded Zenteno's effort. "She's stepping up to the plate, and I'm ready to support her and her organization and the philosophy behind it."

Trevino agrees that education is key to change. There are those who don't see a problem leaving a dog tied up in the middle of nowhere, he said.

"Sometimes I don't think the abuse is intentional," Trevino said. "You don't want to just keep a dog in your backyard. And don't give him attention, and you don't take him to the vet, and you don't take him for walks," Trevino said. That's abuse, he said, noting that many of his neighbors would disagree.

The constable said Barrio Dogs programs could help pet owners understand the commitment an animal requires. He foresees a partnership with Barrio Dogs in which deputies who are experts in animal cruelty laws participate in school programs.

In her community, Zenteno said, animal owners often don't consider dogs part of the family. A macho attitude keeps many from sterilizing their dogs. And although she sees little evidence because of its underground nature, Zenteno says organized dog fights take place.

Zenteno started her educate, empower and transform mission on her street and the surrounding blocks. When she spots a loose or chained dog, she looks for its owner to talk about the animal's needs. If the dog is unwanted, she takes it to a boarding facility to stay while it gets vet care and waits for a permanent home.

She does a lot of business with **Gulfgate Animal Hospital** and AC Grooming's boarding facility, because they are in the heart of the barrio, she said. She also collaborates with the Spay Neuter Assistance Program.

Zenteno emphasizes that she is not operating a rescue group, although there are 12 homeless dogs being boarded or in foster care with Barrio Dogs' assistance. Zenteno admits she has trouble saying no to an animal in need, but her full-time job as an IT professional at Spectra Energy also keeps her busy.

The nonprofit group plans a grand kickoff event 2-6 p.m. April 10 at Bohemeo's, 708 Telephone Road (barriodogs.org). Her sister-in-law, Norma Zenteno, who has helped rally support from area musicians and artists, will perform.

When residents hear about Barrio Dogs' mission, most are supportive. Some generously offer donations.

"People are willing to give money if 'you do it.' I'm saying: 'Why don't we all try to do something?'" Zenteno said. "I'm dug in now. I care about the community, and I really want to see it change. I feel like this is my way to try and make a difference."

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