

A FOSTER MOM'S STORY

I was 50 years old and had never heard of rescue. We had dogs all of our lives and some came from shelters, but we had gone the standard route of pet stores or breeders over the years. So when my daughter told me it was time to “rescue” a dog, I wasn’t sure just what she meant.

Our first stop was a farm in Lancaster County. She and I never realized that we were entering a puppy mill. The barn stalls were decently clean there and were filled with all kinds of pups. But when the young girl who was guiding us around took us outside to another area, my heart dropped. There were pens piled on pens filled with dogs of all breeds and sizes – all basking under the hot sun with no protection. My daughter and I were left alone to look at the hundreds of dogs. One little Cocker Spaniel had her foot caught in the wire cage and was screaming for help. My daughter freed the caught foot. I wondered what would have happened to the Cocker if my daughter and I hadn’t been there. The dogs were mostly dirty and looked uncared for. Some just lay in their pens as though hopeless. Others jumped and barked and begged our attention. We left there with those images engraved in our minds – without a dog – and went straight to the Humane Society to file a complaint.

Next stop – my husband’s idea – was another Lancaster family who bred labs. Cute little pups – healthy and well cared for – but something nagged at me and said – These pups will easily find homes – what about the ones no one wants?

Thus my first experience with rescue – a kind-hearted woman who we discovered on the Internet and a home filled with foster doggies. We found our Toby there – who is now nine years old. The woman took a lot of time with us to make sure we could offer a good home to Toby, gave us books to read, supplies to get started, vet records for the care Toby already had, and lots of encouragement.

About three years later we rescued another dog from Furry Friends Network. Unknowingly for me, this was the start of a different road on my path through life. After receiving e-mail messages from Furry Friends Network requesting help with fostering dogs, my family finally gave in and took on our first foster dog. Laurel was an older Coonhound without a whole lot of options left. She became like one of our own dogs, part of our pack, and eventually was adopted by a great family, that has now become our family friends.

As we began fostering a variety of dogs, I always had a curiosity about the shelters where some of these dogs came from. So I began transporting – driving to MD, WV, VA to pick up dogs and bring them north into foster homes. A very poor, rural shelter in Point Pleasant, WV – where my own dog came from – was closely connected to Furry Friends Network. Because of the high intake of animals and small shelter, euthanasia was a constant threat. The method by which these dogs died, was in a gas chamber.

On my first trip to the shelter, I drove a cargo van along with two other women who also drove cargo vans. We were picking up over 50 dogs to transport back to our Furry Friends Network foster homes. We left at midnight, and arrived at the shelter at 7:00 a.m. This was culture shock for me. A dilapidated building – a long row of pens - three to four dogs stuffed into each small pen – the remainder of the dogs in hastily constructed fences outside – very little shelter for them –

a gas chamber at the end of the row of pens where dogs and cats were gassed weekly – and next to that a freezer where the deceased cats were kept until garbage pick-up day. I choked back tears the whole time I was there, realizing the hopelessness of this situation and picturing my own rescued dog, Erin – who had come from this shelter – from one of those crowded pens.

We loaded dogs into crates in our vans. One dog wasn't coming because overnight he had been killed by another dog in his crowded pen. More tears when we arrived in PA and pulled into a parking lot where all of the Furry Friends Network foster families were eagerly waiting for their foster doggies. Tears of exhaustion and remembrance of the day just past and tears of joy in knowing these dogs who were lucky enough to escape shelter life would be pampered and loved.

Through the years my family has fostered many dogs – pregnant dogs, mamas and their pups, dogs with mange, dogs with broken limbs, a variety of breeds, large and small, all having one thing in common...a resiliency that helped them survive difficult situations before coming into rescue and an unaltered joy in life. These dogs have brought more goodness to their humans than any measure of goodness we could have given to them. They have been adopted by wonderful families, people at one time unknown to me who now have become close and treasured. Some of our former foster dogs have become therapy dogs, some are doing therapy in their own homes, helping children overcome the sadness connected with parents' divorce or gently cuddling close to Downs' Syndrome kiddos. Others are regular visitors in schools or nursing homes. One is even his dad's co-pilot on air flights! Amazing the miracles a furry friend can manage to perform.

One of my most loved former foster dogs is Ruby – an older hound who was pregnant and living in a kill shelter. I drove to VA on a Friday to pick up Ruby. She was scheduled to be spayed that day and her pups aborted. On Sunday morning Ruby gave birth to seven puppies in our home. Now both Ruby and her pups are in loving homes, bringing joy to their families. Their fate could have been much different.

And of course, there is my Gracie. On another trip to a WV shelter, my husband and I noticed this sad-looking pup in a crate separated from all of the other dogs. The pup was creepy-looking – no hair and sores all over her body. She was suffering from a severe case of Demodectic Mange. The shelter's plan was to let her die, as they had no means by which to treat her. But instead, my husband and I brought her home with us. We fostered her through Furry Friends Network who provided excellent vet care for her. We gave her the name "Grace" because she needed God's grace to pull through. After months of intensive care, our little girl started to grow wispy strands of golden colored hair and eventually we realized we had a Golden Retriever mix. When the time came to list Gracie on Furry Friends Network's website so she could be adopted, I knew I could not give her up. We adopted her, and she is the joy of my heart.

Knowing how many desperate situations there are and how many dogs need only that one small chance – a chance to be rescued from a shelter, a chance to leave behind life on the streets, a chance to be released from a home that is not suitable, a chance to escape cruelty, a chance to know love and affection for the first time, a chance to receive life-saving vet care, a chance to have a hopeful future – how can a dog lover turn away?

People may think the life style of a rescuer is a little over-the-edge – with dogs living in almost every room of the house, with all rooms puppy-proofed, with never-ending canine commotion,

with conversations revolving around dog foods and dog behaviors and new experiences with foster dogs, with most hours of each day devoted to caring for dogs, with dog beds and dog crates and dog dishes and dog toys decorating the house – but no one could be more compassionate and kind than the network of rescuers who encourage and support one another in this important work of saving these precious lives.

Won't you consider embarking on this life saving mission with me and open up your heart and home to a dog or cat in need? Even on your worst day, you will have rewards beyond measure by saving an animal's life.

Stephanie Grossnickle
Furry Friends Network Foster Mom