

BY CHRISTINE A. VERSTRAETE

Something to Bark About

When Brendle, a 10-year-old English Bulldog, began fainting a couple years ago, her owners Kevin and Terri Hinton of Decatur, Ill., had cause for concern. Both Brendle's mother and sister had died from heart problems.

Brendle, however, had never shown any signs or symptoms of heart trouble. After testing revealed some fatty deposits around her heart, the overweight dog's health seemed to improve with a change in diet and subsequent weight loss.

A year later, in February 1997, Brendle fainted again and was brought to the Northgate Pet Clinic in Decatur at which Terri was a receptionist for 11 years. The examination and electrocardiogram results worried Dr. Betsy Hutchens, a fairly new veterinarian who had just completed veterinary

school two years before. Tests showed Brendle's heart was blocked and not pumping blood properly.

"I knew what it was, but I was still fresh out of school so I was scared," admits Hutchens. "I didn't have any other doctor here. Two doctors were on vacation and the head of the clinic was at home. I called a board-certified cardiologist in New York, and he confirmed it."

The diagnosis was serious: Brendle needed emergency heart surgery, and she needed a pacemaker.

The Hintons, who considered their dogs more than pets, took the news hard. "At Christmastime we had small stockings hung for all the animals with their names on," says Kevin. "They were the kids."

They especially had a soft spot for

Brendle because she needed special care. The Hintons had bred Brendle's parents and did not learn of their health problems until it was too late for her. She was born with spina bifida, making her incontinent. "We were afraid that no one else would take care of her, so we decided to keep her," Terri says of Brendle. "She's the sweetest-dispositioned dog. She's been my baby for 10 years."

Hutchens was concerned, knowing Brendle's health history. She also didn't want Terri to worry because she was expecting her first child after miscarrying four years earlier. "I knew how much [Brendle] meant to



SOMETHING TO BARK ABOUT

Terri and Kevin," she explains. "Terri was pregnant, and she didn't need the stress of her dog dying. Brendle is such a sweet dog, but she had a lot of health problems. She was down from the start."

Brendle was down again, but certainly not out. Some might call the following events mere coincidences, but those connected with Brendle's heart-saving surgery prefer another word. "It's fate, I think," says Carolyn Bahr, also of Decatur.

Bahr had lost her husband, Charles, only a few weeks earlier. When the funeral director said her husband's pacemaker had to be removed before his cremation, for some reason she said she wanted it back. "I really don't know why, but I did think that maybe it could be used for someone else," she explains.

Since U.S. medical restrictions prevent pacemakers from being re-used in another human, Bahr's son-in-law, Orlando Bohlen, thought maybe Dr. Lawrence Baker, head of Hutchens' veterinary clinic, might want the pacemaker. The pacemaker battery was good for 10 years and still had five years left. Two hours later, Brendle was brought in.

viated only one obstacle. One of the pacemaker's lead wires was missing, and the clinic didn't have a fluoroscope, usually used to guide the wires in during surgery. The pacemaker also had to be recalibrated because a dog's heart rate is different than a person's.

The hours ticked by, and it didn't look good for Brendle. "Her heart

The diagnosis was serious: Brendle needed **EMERGENCY HEART SURGERY**, and she needed a pacemaker.

Hutchens says she didn't even know about the pacemaker at first. "Somebody said there's a pacemaker on Dr. Baker's desk and I said, 'What pacemaker?'" she recalls. "There's only been one [pacemaker] in our clinic—15 years ago."

Having a pacemaker available alle-

was failing her," says Kevin. "We were trying to get hold of anyone at the University of Illinois [medical school] to see what could be done. Terri and I discussed what we were going to do. For a time, Terri wanted to bring Brendle back home and let her sit in the sun because she loves

SOMETHING TO BARK ABOUT

PHOTO BY MIKE WILSON

Brendle (shown before her heart surgery) cuddles up to Terri Hinton.



GERMAN SHEPHERD DOG

to sunbathe."

Brendle's quota of miracles was far from full, however. "There's some divine intervention in there somewhere," says Kevin.

Amazingly, a representative of the pacemaker company was located nearby. She recalibrated the available pacemaker by computer and contacted the company about donating her demonstration lead wire. Because time was crucial, the wire could be sterilized only for a few hours instead of the more than 10 hours typically required.

By 8 p.m. that evening, Hutchens and Baker were ready for surgery. Although Hutchens had performed various procedures in veterinary school, she was nervous because this was her first heart surgery on a patient. By then, Brendle was just hanging on. "Her heart rate was deathly low right before we went in," explains Hutchens. "I didn't even know if she was going to make it through surgery. Dr. Baker was with me every step of the way. That's the reason I felt OK."

Terri stayed and watched the sur-

gery while several friends and family members paced the waiting room. Kevin had to return to work but says it wasn't easy to leave. "Every time the phone rang, I just panicked. You don't give up, but I didn't think she was going to make it."

Three hours later, the surgery was over. Brendle survived, but a buildup of fluid in her chest warranted her being monitored carefully. The Hinton brought her home that night and laid her on a mattress in the living room. "It was a rough couple days," says Kevin. "We'd just go in there and see if she was breathing. It was a scary thing."

For the next few days, friends helped put Brendle in the car so Terri could take the dog with her to work. "We had our own intensive care," says Terri. "People would come to the house and help with her since I couldn't lift [her myself]. I just took her with me to work every day. She was getting a lot of shots and stuff . . . to make sure there was not any infection."

Four days later, Brendle began

SOMETHING TO BARK ABOUT

See more ads next page

coming around. She's been a completely different dog since. "She's like the Energizer® bunny," enthuses Kevin. "Brendle constantly runs now, and she hasn't run in years."

"A few months after the surgery she came running up to the fence," says Terri. "She definitely has more energy. It's wonderful."

Carolyn Bahr says she knows her husband would have approved. "Chuck was so crazy about dogs. I knew if it went that way, he'd be happy. All of his family are crazy about dogs, and they thought it was just wonderful."

But no one is more pleased with the outcome than Brendle's veterinarian. "Brendle is such a sweet dog," Hutchens says. "When I had to put the IV catheter in, usually assistants are restraining the dogs as a lot of times they'll bite at your hand. Brendle's such a baby, no one was holding her head. When I slipped the catheter in, she reached over and licked my hand."

"About a week after the surgery, she started being her old self," she con-

tinues. "I wouldn't tell [the Hinton] at the time, but I didn't think she would make it through anesthesia. I think the thing that makes me feel good about it and makes me feel warm is I think there was a kind of fate involved. Some people believe in God, and I do. I believe it was a godsend."

Kevin, Hutchens and Bahr have enjoyed sharing Brendle's story on TV shows such as "Inside Edition," "Leeza" and "Maury Povich," but the Hinton says nothing compares to being with their son, Mason, and watching Brendle romping outside or lazing in the sun.

"In a year's time I lost my father, got a son and lost three dogs," shares Kevin. "It puts things in a different perspective. You look at things a little different after that. If there's a ray of hope, you go for it. The whole thing was worth it."

Christine Verstraete is a life-long dog lover and owner of a German Shepherd Dog and a Malamute mix. An award-winning newspaper and freelance magazine writer, she has been writing for DOG WORLD since 1989. ➤



Münster Abbey®

"Special Dogs for Special People"

Quality German Shepherd Pups • AKC reg. & Import reg. Bred for temperament, obedience & protection. No inbreeding. Hip and health warranty.



FREE SHIPPING

Ph/Fax (207) 345-9796

member: CKC, SV, Schutzhund USA



Kuhnhof Kennels

At stud:

Django v. Oberen-Lechsee SchH III, FH, IP III, Tröll Korbelbach son
Fox v. Gleisdreieck SchH III, Seigo & Lord grson
Orly v. Lunsholz SchH III, Groll Herkulesblick son
Caro v. Haus-Cismar SchH III, Mink Haus Wittfeld son