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PRIME | DOG RESCUE

Foster families for pets

Story by Christine A. Verstraete

Looking at Rosie the poodle scoot across the carpet or play with her toy, you wouldn't think she's different than any other dog.

While it's not known whether it was genetics or a result of having spent her life in a crate as a breeder at a puppy mill, 6-year-old Rosie's back legs were atrophied and unusable. After being rescued, both of the dog's back legs were amputated below the thigh, but that hasn't stopped her. Rosie is a now a "spokesdog" against puppy mills and a symbol for pet adoption, appearing at local parades and other events.

She also is a member with her owner of Wisconsin Citizens Against Puppy Mills. (www.facebook.com/pages/Wisconsin-Citizens-Against-Puppy-Mills/179441728749609).

"She hops around and runs like any other dog," says Rosie's owner, Mary Palmer of Racine, who's also founder and president



of Northcentral Maltese Rescue Inc. (Read Rosie's story at malteserescue.homestead.com/Rosie.html.)

Palmer, 68, is one of the many dog lovers who do whatever they can to help the throwaways: lost, abandoned, injured and abused dogs. Many dogs, often once family pets, are taken to the animal shelter when

an elderly owner dies, is hospitalized, or put in a nursing home. And sadly, many pets are the silent victims of the economy or the selfishness of their former owners.

"When times get hard, pets are usually the first to get cut from the family budget," says Kerry Anderson, office manager at Kenosha's Safe Harbor Humane Society, which at



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTINE VERSTRAETE

Mary Palmer, of Racine, and her granddaughter, Sarah Dankemeyer, sit with Rosie the Poodle (center) and their foster dogs.

this writing was at its capacity of 40 dogs and 60 cats. "As kids go off to college, families bring in pets because they don't want to take care of them. Luckily, we have eight group foster homes who will take in animals, but we don't have enough."

Overbreeding and the lack of spaying and neutering result in 4 million dogs and cats being euthanized in the United States each year, according to the United States Humane Society. Some escape that fate and make their way to "forever" families via the care and dedication of volunteer foster parents, rescue workers and rescue groups.

A volunteer at Safe Harbor, 46-year-old Linda Asma of Pleasant Prairie, started fostering last April and calls it "a whole new level of satisfaction. It's very fulfilling." One of her fosters, a 9-year-old cocker spaniel named Libby, is a gentle, loving dog that was found wandering the streets. She had badly infected ears and skin problems and her owners didn't want to pay to reclaim her. "She's just happy," Asma says. "She's just the best dog. She'll be an easy fit."

Despite seeing the worst that humans can do to animals, helping some of those unwanted dogs get a new life is what has kept 56-year-old Deb Rawdillot doing rescue work the past six years. The southwestern Illinois resident is on the board of Adopt a Husky, (www.adoptahusky.com) which adopts out at least 50 dogs a year, mostly in the Midwest and Northwest.

"I'm shocked by the number of dogs that are thrown away each year and the reasons they are," she says. "Frequently they come in from horrendous circumstances, emaciated ... I've seen dogs with nails curled up under their feet that can't walk. In the last two months we took in two dogs that had broken legs."

Still, rescuers like Vicki Lorenz, 53, founder of Tiny Paws Small Dog Rescue (www.tinypawssmalldogrescue.com) near Union Grove, say they can't quit. "How can I walk away from this?" asks Lorenz, who founded the group four years ago. "I've thought about folding because of emotional, financial and physical strain but I know if not for us, they wouldn't be alive today. That keeps me going."

Most rescue groups rely on donations, the generosity of volunteers and local veterinarians willing to provide treatment and discounted services. All rescued animals receive thorough

basic commands and are adopted out when they are stable and ready to go to a family. The process can take weeks, months, or maybe longer.

Sometimes loving foster parents adopt the dogs themselves or know that some dogs may not find another home. Palmer, who began rescuing dogs 14 years ago, knows that may be the case with Abby, who she was taking in for an MRI. The sweet-natured, 10-year-old dog had a liver shunt and has some physical problems like spinning and continuously flicking her tongue which might have neurological causes.

"There are times it gets hard and times over the years I have suffered from burnout," admits Palmer, who works with some 100 foster homes and other rescue groups across the country. "I feel like I'm fortunate to find dogs good homes."

Her granddaughter, Sarah Dankemeyer, 19, feels the same after helping with the rescue dogs. "I'm kind of proud to talk about it to my

"It's pretty rewarding, especially when you get a puppy mill dog and they come around, and get playful. And I'm really proud of my grandmother."

Sarah Dankemeyer

examinations and appropriate medical treatment, which often includes costly surgeries. Once in foster homes, they are acclimated to living in a home if they aren't used to that, are taught

friends," says Dankemeyer. "It's pretty rewarding, especially when you get a puppy mill dog and they come around, and get playful. And I'm really proud of my grandmother."