

TUCKER J.
COOMBE

A Dog's Life

*The foster parents of Sheltered Paws
put pups on the road home.*

Maude would never have won a beauty contest. One of her eyes was lower than the other and dripped constantly, and her nose was a bit off-center. It was almost as if someone had wrapped a hand around her muzzle and given it a twist, says Tracey Buckmeier, a kennel worker at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals's main shelter in Northside. But Buckmeier was fond of the sweet little spitz mix, which had been found tied to a car bumper. When visitors would come in looking for a small dog, Buckmeier would point them toward Maude, but her misshapen face won her no admirers.

Maude was eventually adopted. A few months later, to Buckmeier's dismay, she reappeared at the shelter. She'd been found tied to a fence, and she looked half-starved. During her second stint at the SPCA, Maude became hysterical whenever she was placed too close to other dogs. It became clear she had to leave the shelter. But this time, luck was on her side: Maude went to a foster home.

Sheltered Paws Dog Rescue, a nonprofit organization run in close coordination with SPCA Cincinnati, takes on dogs such as Maude—neither readily adoptable, nor clear cases for euthanasia—and places them in the homes of volunteers to be fed, cared for, and socialized until they are ready to be adopted into permanent homes. In an average year this all-volunteer program fosters and places between 250 and 400 dogs and puppies—all on an annual budget of about \$10,000.

Many of the dogs that wind up at SPCA Cincinnati fall into one of two categories: those that the average person would want for a family pet (obviously healthy, relatively young, and temperamentally sound), and those that are too sick or too dangerous and must be put down. A certain number fall somewhere in the middle, however: a pregnant female, or one with a litter of newborn pups; dogs suffering from kennel cough, mange, or other mild, treatable medical conditions; and animals like Maude that can't withstand the stress of a shelter.

Sheltered Paws foster parents often describe their dogs as "the neediest of the needy." Maude certainly qualified. Not only was her odd face a

EAGER BEAGLE

*As many as 400
dogs a year pass
through the skillful
hands of Sheltered
Paws Dog Rescue.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID SORCHER

BACKSTORY

problem, but the dog's rough history had taken a toll, says Gwen, the foster parent who took her on. When she arrived at Gwen's house, Maude was skittish and easily agitated, and would rouse herself into "blood-curdling, bark-attack mode" when any of Gwen's four other dogs walked past her crate. (Gwen, who sometimes has more dogs in her home than neighborhood ordinances permit, asked that only her first name be used.) "But dogs love human contact," Gwen says. "You can go a long way toward getting a dog's cooperation and trust with touch." After several weeks of Gwen's skilled attention, Maude was quite comfortable curling up in the woman's arms. But it was three exhausting months before she could be trusted not to lunge at the other dogs.

A veterinary ophthalmologist determined that Maude was blind in one eye, but otherwise her health was good. After about four months she was placed on an adoption list. The first couple who met the dog—Lois Reece, a retired 911 dispatch supervisor, and John Mondary, a retired police officer—took to her instantly.

Today Maude revels in her life with Reece and Mondary, who live on five acres in Clermont County. They describe her as a dog that "needs to touch you all the time"—leaning against a leg, or resting her head in someone's lap. They allow her to sleep on the bed, put up with her prolific shedding, and on Halloween dress her up as a pirate—complete with eye patch. Reece and Mondary know better than to let her run loose with the neighborhood dogs; but when they introduced a little female puppy into the family, Maude surprised them both. "She didn't growl at that puppy one bit," says Reece. "She just put that puppy's head in her mouth—real gently—and dragged her around the house."

CHRISTINA HAMBERG, a soft-spoken woman in her mid-30s who works as an educational resource coordinator for special needs children at the Hamilton County Board of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disorders, can simultaneously comfort a newborn baby and calmly answer telephone questions about kennel-cough medication. Her patience and multitasking abil-

ity are essential. She founded Sheltered Paws in 1997 when she worked as a volunteer at SPCA Cincinnati. Since then, Hamberg and her husband Jerry have had a family (a 5-year-old daughter and an 11-month-old son) and have cared for at least 15 dogs and 80 puppies at various times in their Liberty Township home. Her extended family is even larger. Through Sheltered Paws, Hamberg and others have fostered hundreds of pets.

Because she can't devote herself full time to Sheltered Paws, Hamberg relies on a team of volunteers to help track the foster dogs, coordinate adoptions, run a web site, and organize many of the program's other logistical details. She also depends on the generosity of two local veterinarians who have treated Sheltered Paws patients for years at a friendly discount.

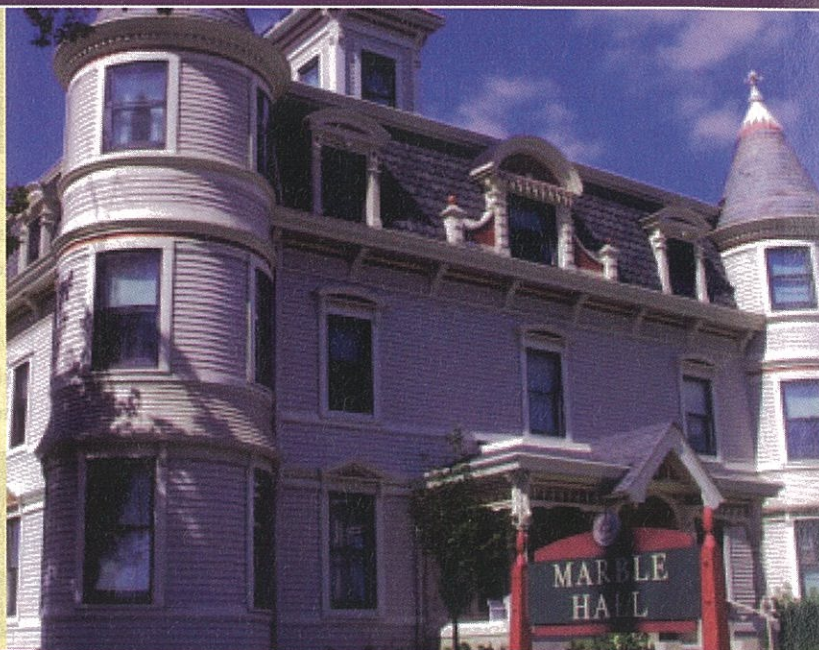
Over breakfast at Panera Bread Company, Hamberg flips through a photo album and recounts the stories of dozens of animals that have moved through the program. Her special fondness for "the Old Timers" is evident. The Old Timers, as the foster parents call them, are the dogs that

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have waited the longest (usually, more than six months) in the adoption runs. Often these are the large, predominantly black dogs that seem ubiquitous in every shelter. "Shepherd mixes, chow mixes, anything over 45 pounds," she says. "They're just not adopted as readily. People are willing to accept horrid behavior from a small dog. They can accept the fact that it's not housebroken, that it's not good with other dogs, that it's not good with kids—and they want it because it's 15 pounds. It's amazing."

Hamberg recalls Purdy, a furry, 80-pound collie mix that was dropped off at the shelter with a warning that she was not good with children. Before moving into a foster home, Purdy spent more than a year at SPCA Cincinnati, becoming so depressed she would not even lift her head off the kennel floor. But once Purdy was in foster care, it became evident that the "not good with children" label was all wrong.

Most of the animals that move into a foster home arrive there because their owners "don't have time for them or are moving" and have nothing more than "doggy

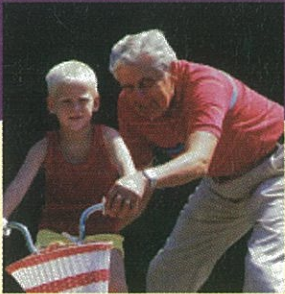
issues," Hamberg says. That is, they need a refresher course in housetraining and an introduction to basic household manners. "At the beginning," she says, "many of these dogs are in a shell, especially if they've already spent time in the shelter. You never know what a dog's going to be like until you've had it a while and it feels safe. A dog will hold its personality back until it knows, 'Hey, I'm out for good! This person isn't going to hurt me.'"

Andy Mahlman, Operations Manager at SPCA Cincinnati, says the need for canine foster care is overwhelming. "Our shelter is an open-access shelter," he says. "That means we take everything and anything that comes to us. We're not selective."

Dogs come in for all imaginable reasons, says Mahlman. People move out of town, move in with their parents, develop allergies to their own pets. The dogs jump fences, tug on the leash, chew up shoes, bark incessantly, urinate on the living room rug. Sometimes dogs are brought in simply because they are too old, too big, too messy, too loud, or too much work. SPCA Cincinnati offers the services of a dog trainer to

help owners cope, but often dogs are given up anyway. Once an animal is relinquished, the staff veterinarian examines it to decide whether or not it is adoptable, and whether it might qualify for a foster home. "If there is a foster mom or dad available," says Mahlman, "we're thrilled to have an animal fostered out."

Foster mothers and fathers have countless tales of the animals that have passed through their lives: the shepherd mix that thrilled to the challenge of fence-jumping at two in the morning; the sweet, young female that gave birth to two puppies in the back of a minivan en route to its foster home. Often the volunteers describe these dogs with a mixture of pride and amusement, like parents who have successfully steered their offspring through the "terrible twos." Hamberg's most recent case was a young shepherd-hound mix that was adept at pulling containers off shelves, popping the lids, and scattering the contents. "Nothing was ever shredded or destroyed," she says. "But I'd walk into the room, and it would look like the FBI ransacked it."



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BACKSTORY

KIM SERRA-FREER of Westwood, a 30-year-old human resources manager with Hamilton County, volunteers as the assistant program director for Sheltered Paws. When Serra-Freer explains it, the work of a foster parent sounds deceptively simple. "You want to take a dog that has either been abandoned or abused, or just living at the shelter, and turn it into a pet," she says. "The ones that were formerly pets don't take as long to adjust. But ones that never were pets need to learn how to do things that others would take for granted."

Some of the dogs, she explains, have never encountered stairs. Some will try to walk right through a glass door. Some need to learn that couches, beds, and kitchen counters are off-limits. Housed in a safe, predictable environment, the dogs learn to negotiate these and other new challenges.

As the foster parents work with the dogs, they pay attention to their characteristic behaviors. Is this dog fearful of men? Does it do well with children? Is it a door-dasher? A cat-chaser? A fence-jumper? Is it aggressive around food? Does it bond easily with people? Does it throw up during car rides?

Some of these issues can be overcome; others can only be identified for potential adopters. Even with all the love and care in the world, Hamberg believes some dogs will never make good pet prospects. In the eight years that she's been at it, Hamberg has made the difficult decision—after months of effort and evaluation by a professional trainer—to euthanize four foster dogs she felt could not be safely adopted out. Those were four hard decisions, but they were mitigated somewhat by the fact that Hamberg and her comrades at Sheltered Paws have found permanent homes for so many dogs.

When a dog is ready for adoption, its foster parent must give an honest description of the animal's temperament. There can be no sugar-coating. Each of these dogs has been abandoned once, and sometimes two or three times. The last thing a foster parent wants is for the dog to wind up back in a shelter or out on the street.

A handful of Sheltered Paws volunteers spend time with the Old Timers remaining at the shelter. Twice a month Kim Pennecamp and her mother, Mary Cavalcante, load a couple of Old Timers into the back seat of their white '97 Grand Marquis (fondly dubbed The Hair Mobile) and shuttle them to Classic Canine Clips in Nor-

wood, where groomer Sharon Quallen bathes and grooms them at a 50 percent discount. The excursion, says Pennecamp, "is a day of joy for them, and when they're all clean and cut, you can tell they feel so much better." Feel better, look better, and have a better chance of being adopted.

FOR DOGS LUCKY enough to land in a foster home, there is a good chance for a happy ending. Purdy, for instance, was recently adopted by 14-year-old Erin Horton of Lebanon, Ohio. Still looking a bit like a lumbering black bear, Purdy shadows her owner continuously. When Erin is gone, the dog lies in her special corner of the living room and will not budge. In fact, the Horton family reports that when Erin and her mother traveled to Washington, D.C., Purdy maintained her spot for the entire weekend that Erin was gone. Having a permanent home has changed the dog.

"When we first got her, whenever someone in the house would raise their voice or move their hand fast, she would get scared and back off," Erin says. "But she doesn't worry about it anymore. She trusts us now." Purdy will never be a bouncing ball of energy. She'll probably continue to seek out the bathtub during thunderstorms and, despite Erin's best efforts, may never be a Frisbee champ. But the despondent dog that wasn't "good with children" has found a companion, and a lot of pleasure. "No one ever taught Purdy how to fetch or play tug when she was little," says Erin, "so she doesn't really know how to play the way some dogs do. But she'll race me to the front door, and she loves to chase frogs into the pond. She's just such a sweet dog."

Anyone who has ever struggled through housebreaking, barking, and occasional bad behavior knows that a new dog can be an exhausting challenge. For foster parents, life is a rotating series of these "new dog" adventures, and that can take a toll. "Most people who do [pet] rescue get to a point where they're burned out, and they can't decide if they're going to keep doing it or if they're going to quit," says Hamberg. "We're all like that. I'm like that. It's just a normal part of doing rescue."

But for most volunteers, the Maudes and Purdys of the world provide the perspective. "You think about all the really great dogs that have been saved or helped through the program," Hamberg says, "dogs that wouldn't have made it otherwise. I think that's what keeps you going." ©