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 DOGS, DOGS, DOGS!

Loving Miss Daisy

by Lorraine Houston

It has been a difficult time for the Houston family. My mother-in-law passed away quite suddenly this past June. Then, only weeks later, my father-in-law suffered a stroke which left him confused and struggling for words and phrases he knew but could not seem to bring to mind.

We were all worried about him, but the doctors were optimistic and said he would recover to some degree. After reading and analyzing his scan, they said Dad may never regain all of his memory for names, places and words but both his mobility and speech would remain intact. Family and friends gathered at the hospital in Collingwood to offer assistance in any way they could.

Despite Dad's fragile state, he kept asking about his dog, Daisy. "My dog, my dog, how is my dog?" He could not remember her name, but he knew Daisy was at home and needed to be cared for. My brother-in-law, Bill, who lives only two streets away from Dad, had already been over to let Daisy out and feed her. Although Bill has a young family, a dog of his own and both he and his wife work during the day, he offered to take Daisy to his home until Dad was able to come home from the hospital. Not the ideal situation for either, but a solution that could work for the short term. Dad was delighted with the idea; he was grateful that she would be taken care of by family she knew and that she was close by so that she could come and visit him at the hospital.

A few days later we got a call from Bill who wanted to discuss a few things about Daisy's behaviours. She was a 'bit of a barker', a 'food guarder' and was having some 'house training issues'. We weren't quite sure if he was asking for tips or if he was hoping that perhaps we would offer to take her in the interim. We understood the challenges both he and Daisy were facing. Daisy had lived the past ten years with Mom and Dad Houston who had adopted her when she was about ten months old from a young Toronto couple who had bought the Standard Schnauzer as a puppy. The couple lived in an apartment and found her boundless energy, barking and growing size "too much to handle".

Before Dad's stroke, we had been aware that Daisy was missing Mom terribly. She would sit for hours on the couch where Mom used to sit to watch TV, her eating habits had changed and she did not seem to be enjoying her walks and outings with the same enthusiasm and vigor. She was mourning the loss of her Mom. Now, she lost her Dad. Daisy has always been a gregarious, happy girl with a zest for adventure. She has never had any formal training, but communicated well and had inadvertently been trained by Mom and Dad to bark (sharply, loudly and non-stop) until they responded to whatever it was she was requesting. Some of the family described her as incorrigible, obnoxious and 'a brat.' I always thought she was brilliant (bordering genius), fun, and predictable. I guess it comes down to perspective. In any case, it was a difficult time for Daisy.

We offered to bring her to Toronto as long as Dad was on board with the idea. We knew the highlight of his day was when Bill and Daisy came to visit at the hospital and that was something we could not provide. Bill said he would talk to Dad and see what he said. Daisy knew our dogs and got on well with them, she enjoyed their company and we hoped she would be happy living with us, albeit temporarily. Bill called later to say that Dad was fine with Daisy coming to Toronto, he was thankful she was being taken care of by family and anticipated he would be home very soon.

We picked Daisy up the next day, along with all her personal items. She settled in nicely at our home and quickly became 'one of the girls.' She seemed to enjoy the new action and took great pride in waking up our son, Ben, each morning for work and sharing toast with our other son, Stewart.. Walks to the park were exciting, but certainly not something one would do in wet weather (life according to Daisy, not our dogs or me).

Shortly after Daisy arrived, we received a call from Bill explaining that Dad was being transferred from the hospital to a facility that would help him recover from the stroke. Nobody was sure how long he would be staying. Daisy lived with us for the summer and into the fall while Dad was in the rehabilitation centre. Ian took her up north every weekend to visit Dad and it wasn't long before most everyone in the place knew Daisy. In fact, she was often the topic of conversation through the week with the residents and nurses. In October, we received the news that Dad was moving home. He couldn't wait to get Daisy back and many felt that she was his primary motivator. Although Dad still has not regained total recall, he is doing better and is so much happier and content to be in his own home with his cherished dog.

Going through a family crisis brings a number of issues to mind. One of them being - if anything should happen, who, if anyone, has been designated to care for your beloved pets? Let's face it, we really don't like thinking about things like this, but scrambling in the heat of a crisis seems to happen all too frequently. As many of you know, I am very involved with dog rescue and often network with other rescue organizations. I can't tell you how many times our list members have had to post messages that read something like this: five- year- old Labrador/Shepherd mix, spayed female, housetrained, loves other dogs; great people dog - needs urgent rescue. Owner is in the hospital and has no one to take the dog.

Just last week, there was a Shih Tzu mix whose owner had passed away and the little soul was taken to the animal shelter because nobody in the family wanted him or could make alternate arrangements for him. This scenario actually happens more than people realize. The majority of dogs we take into our rescue are seniors and, sadly, we meet a lot of dogs whose elderly owners have been moved to hospitals, hospices or long term care facilities. Often their treasured dogs are taken to an animal shelter when family, neighbours or friends can't or don't want to keep them. Sometimes family or friends do keep them and all is well, but other times the dog may not be a welcome addition and is neglected, banished to a backyard and/or left to roam. Some dogs are euthanized when no one steps up to make arrangements for them.

Preplanning makes all the difference in the world for the future of your dog should something unforeseen renders you incapable of caring for him/her. Having prearranged, designated caregivers in place may be an idea. The agreement you make with your chosen caregiver might change over time, or you may choose to designate a different caregiver if lifestyle, availability or willingness change.

You may want to consider contacting the rescue organization or shelter you adopted

from to inquire if they have any programs in place. The person or organization you choose would be one in which you have complete faith and trust, as you are literally charging them with the life and future of your dog.

If you have chosen a close friend or family member, it is a good idea to make sure that your dog knows them and that you and your dog have been to their house to visit at least on a few occasions. This way, your dog is familiar with the person and their home, making a stressful situation a little less traumatic. If, for some reason, you find their environment is not suitable, it is better to know ahead of time so you can continue to seek an appropriate caregiver. Consider having an 'emergency short term' contact and another long term assigned person.

Whatever you decide, it is important to keep in touch with your designate so that their contact information is current and available. Maintain veterinary health records and keep notes on any medications. Compile a "personality journal" to include information on food, feeding and walking schedules, the location of dog toys, bed and leash as well as a description of the dog's likes and dislikes, etc. It's a good idea to carry a card or paper in your wallet that contains information about your pets and who to contact in case of an emergency. Keeping similar information on your fridge at home is also recommended. Make sure loved ones are aware you have arrangements in place for your dog (s) so that they can contact your appointed caregiver should the need arise (hopefully, it won't!).

It may be prudent to seek legal council on the subject of designating pet caregivers. Should you become incapacitated, having a verbal agreement in place may not hold up whereas a legal written document would.

Also, more and more people are stipulating provisions for their pets in their Wills. Again, updates and amendments are sometimes needed, but will ensure the care of your pet is not compromised and your wishes will be followed to the letter.

If trouble befalls, you will have peace of mind knowing your dog will be in good hands – even if they're not your hands – they are the ones you have chosen; wisely and with love.

Lorraine Houston is a feature writer for Dogs, Dogs, Dogs! and an evaluator for Therapeutic Paws of Canada and St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs. She is director of Speaking of Dogs, an organization devoted to education, outreach and rescue. A Maxwell Award winner from Dog Writers Assoc. of America, Lorraine lives in Don Mills with her husband, two sons and family dogs. She may be contacted at 416-444-4190 or lh4dogs@rogers.com