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DOGS, DOGS, DOGS!

New Love for Old Dogs

by *Lorraine Houston*

I became hooked in 1987. He was an 8-pound, tan coloured Chihuahua and a rather cantankerous one at that. He had been found wandering the streets of downtown Toronto without a collar or identification. He was clearly an older gentleman and I was sure that whoever lost him would be frantically searching for him. But, like so many dogs admitted into animal shelters, nobody came for him.

Although he was adopted by a retired woman and was adjusting well, things took a turn when her grandchildren came to visit and the little Chihuahua made it abundantly clear that he was not fond of "the little people". Despite behavioural counseling and advice on how to resolve the situation, "Chico" was returned to the shelter several weeks later.

That's when our journey with senior dogs began. My husband and I adopted him and we never looked back. Estimated at around 12 years of age and diagnosed with a mild heart murmur, we figured that he may not be with us very long. We vowed to take each day as a gift. Days turned into years and we were blessed not only with the gift of time, but with the gift of unwavering companionship, comic relief and eternal devotion.

In the summer of 1996, Chico crossed over the Rainbow Bridge when his heart could beat no more. His passing left us devastated. Our other family dogs also felt the loss. Sensing our sorrow, the dogs offered us comfort and support in the way that only dogs can - with unspoken, peaceable respect.

During and since that time, we have had the privilege of fostering and adopting a number of senior dogs. The question I am most often asked is: "Where do these older dogs come from? Surely they have owners?" There is no easy or definitive answer. The first time I saw an older dog come into the shelter where I worked, I could hardly believe my eyes. He was a small Terrier-mix with a white, bearded muzzle and eyes that had seen clearer days. He was scared and disoriented and he continually drank water. He paced and howled in an effort to communicate his confusion. I asked one of my co-workers if she thought his owner would arrive soon to claim him. She replied that she didn't know but had heard that some owners bring their older dogs to the shelter, describing them as "strays" in order to avoid paying veterinary costs or having to make the decision to have them euthanized.

That was over 20 years ago and, to this day, it continues to shock and exasperate me to think people could treat their faithful friend with so much callous disregard. A humane, dignified alternative solution can always be found. If there's a will, there's a way.

I am not saying that all senior dogs come into the care of shelters and rescue organizations this way. The majority of elderly dogs who find themselves with no place to call home are victims of circumstance. According to Ann Wilson, canine foster care provider for Animal Alliance of Canada and the Etobicoke Humane Society, "Often they

belonged to a senior person who was moved into a nursing or retirement home where dogs aren't permitted. Or sometimes the owner has passed away." Ann and hubby, Pete, have worked in the humane/rescue field for over 25 years and have seen, cared for and loved hundreds of senior dogs over the years. "When an owner dies, leaving their beloved dog behind, family and friends can fall short. The question of who will take the dog is answered with a host of reasons why nobody can take the dog." Ann recommends having all of the pet's future care and housing arrangements spelled out in a will.

Sometimes the older dog has become "inconvenient" and/or is starting to show signs of aging. And sometimes it's "easier" for the family to take that new job and move without the hassle of taking the senior dog along. Sometimes long-term human relationships sever and the old dog cramps the new lifestyle. And sometimes people become too busy and don't have time for the dog anymore. Whatever the "reason" - and there are many, many, many reasons - the dog loses.

"One man's loss is another man's gain," according to Nola and Ron Wilson who now adopt only senior dogs and have recently adopted "Rosemary", a 12-year old toy Poodle. "Our decision to adopt seniors came about due to a number of reasons and experiences. Although puppies are cute and a lot of fun, the work and time involved is incredible. House training, obedience training, torn slippers, pillows, mittens and furniture, crates in the kitchen, accidents on the floor, toilet paper strewn all over the house, trips outside in the dead of winter and the middle of the night... it's exhausting! Senior dogs are already house trained, willing to please, quiet and passive - a pleasure to have around. Older dogs are the givers of so much affection, gratitude and love. There is a kind of understanding with a senior dog that comes with age, experience and wisdom. We give as much as we can to a dog who didn't have any chances left. In return, we receive a lot of love. It's a good deal."

When 6-pound Rosemary was admitted into a Toronto shelter in late March, she was in disgraceful condition. Staff could not distinguish between her head and tail because of severe matting. While they groomed her, staff observed a large tumour on her neck. Nobody ever called to claim the wee soul. After the 7-day "stray" holding time was over, she was transferred to a rescue organization and given veterinary attention. With the tumour successfully removed, Rosemary spent several weeks recuperating in her foster home before being made available for adoption.

Nola and Ron fully admit that they became addicted to surfing the "senior" section at www.petfinder.com, a website that features pets for adoption. When Nola saw Rosemary's tiny face looking at her from the computer screen, her heart melted. Ron and Nola spent much of the day discussing the possibility and logistics of adopting Rosemary and decided that they would indeed offer her their home. After completing the adoption process, Rosemary is now part of the Wilson family. She spends her time sharing toast and reading the morning newspaper with Dad, assisting Mom with meal selections, scouting the garden for interesting smells and napping in the sunshine on her new bed. There are many stories like Rosemary's. "Sam", a 10-year old Coonhound, was found wandering the streets of Toronto. Blind in one eye and impaired in the other, it was a miracle he hadn't been hit by a car. Like Rosemary, Sam was admitted into a local Toronto shelter. The 7 days came and went and nobody called or visited the shelter to claim the big dog.

The shelter contacted Jean Stone of Canadian Hound Rescue and arrangements were made to transport Sam to a foster home in Northern Ontario. "He is the sweetest, gentlest dog I've ever met," says Jean, who found Sam his forever home with Peggy Vipond shortly after his arrival.

Sam now lives in a home with two human companions and two canine friends, a 14-year old Bichon Frise named "Sadie" and a 5-year old Labrador Retriever, "Brody". Peggy noted that although Sam was initially timid around his new friends, he quickly integrated himself into their lives and hearts. "He is a warm, friendly companion who enjoys his walks and playing in the yard. He is managing so well that you would not believe that his vision is so impaired. Brody has now adopted Sam as his own and whenever Sam becomes confused or disoriented, Brody will go to his side to lead him.

There is a lot to be said for older dogs. Older, settled dogs like Sam have only one thing to give - love. "I have been blessed with the opportunity share my life with Sam," says Peggy.

As with any commitment, potential adopters of any dog should do their homework and research, ask questions and be sure they are in a position to take on the responsibility before bringing a dog into their lives. Although not always the case, it is not uncommon for senior dogs to have health issues, or the onset of one. If you are unprepared - emotionally and/or financially - it's better for everyone that you do not adopt.

The sad reality is that there are always going to be older dogs who, for whatever reason, need a second (and sometimes third) chance at life and love. Never let anyone tell you that older dogs cannot adjust or share that unique bond. They do. Adopters of senior dogs often say the relationship and bond they develop with their dogs is one of profound closeness. Don't deny your heart the opportunity to share the love of a senior dog for fear of losing that love. Granted, the time you spend together may not be as long as you would like, but the cherished memories you have of your beloved old friend will remain eternally in your heart.

Lorraine Houston is a feature writer for Dogs, Dogs, Dogs!, a foster Mom and member of the Branch Advisory committee for the Scarborough/North York SPCA, an evaluator for St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs and director of Speaking of Dogs. A Maxwell Award winner from Dogs 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