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They Are Fa-mi-ly

Group Gives Nine Previously Doomed Puppies Every Chance Of Living Happily Ever After

By LYNNE TUOHY
Courant Staff Writer

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GRANBY -- They came from a litter of 17 puppies, born sometime around Valentine's Day. Their father was a black Lab and their mother was a Dalmation.

Eight of their siblings were handed off to strangers in front of a WalMart in Waverly, Tenn. The remaining nine - the ones spontaneous shoppers didn't want - were left at a nearby shelter, where they were destined to die if they weren't adopted in a matter of days. They landed in what's known as a "kill shelter" - an oxymoron that describes shelters with high volume and small windows of opportunity for adoption.

That's when a Connecticut-based network of volunteers - Labs4Rescue - and their counterparts in Tennessee sprang into action.

Glenda Campbell in Tennessee got a call from a woman at the shelter. Campbell, who had rescued dogs from the shelter before and is part of the Labs4Rescue network, drove 90 minutes and took all nine puppies. That was April 5.

"Of course I couldn't say no," Jackson said Friday.

Campbell temporarily named the little Labs for members of the Indiana Pacers NBA team, and they were thereafter dubbed "the Pacer pups." Their pictures and story were posted on the Labs4Rescue website as well as on petfinder.com. Within weeks, all nine had "forever homes" throughout New England and New Jersey.

End of story? Nope.

Fast-forward to the present, to a backyard in rural Granby Saturday, where eight of the nine Pacer Pups were reunited for the first time and their owners exclaimed about their similarities.

"You look like Hannah but you're not Hannah," Maura Murphy of Milton, Mass., cooed to what looked like the identical twin to her and Brian Keenan's puppy.

As the dogs zipped around the spacious backyard of Gene and Patt Juiliano, hosts of this chaotic scene, and splashed through a plastic pool that was all their own, sometimes it was possible to distinguish them by collar color alone.

Their owners have similar traits as well, chief among them a commitment to adopting a dog slated for destruction. And none of them flinched - or barely did - as a squadron of pups on the run charged this conversation cluster or that. They also all seemed to have endured insufferable traffic to reach the reunion, but remained undaunted.

Karyn Petersen of Mahwah, N.J., and "Indi" - (short for Indiana; the Pacer tag lives) - traveled first to Danbury to connect with Petersen's daughter, Crystyn Girolami and her Pacer pup - Sonny. Then it was on to Granby.

"We are dog people," Petersen explained. "Meeting other dog people and just seeing the rest of the siblings, seeing how much alike they look, it's exciting."

How the Pacer pups reunion came to be is a quirky tale, befitting the dogs' shared history.

When the Juilianos got their pup - Carlyle - they were concerned about his persistent scratching. The vet determined Carlyle had mites in his hair follicles, something most puppies' immune systems destroy. But with 17 in the litter, the Pacer pups' immune systems were slower to develop.

Patt wanted to share this information with the owners of Carlyle's siblings, and asked Campbell if she knew who had adopted the rest of her foster brood. Campbell did. She was commended by many at Saturday's reunion for enduring their many questions and providing extra information about the respective pups.

And so the e-mail exchanges began. The owners of only one of the nine Pacer pups could not be located. The other eight spent their Saturday in Granby, falling into easy conversation as their dogs frolicked. In addition to Carlyle, Hannah, Indi and Sonny:

Pearl lives in West Newton, Mass. with Janet and Roger Lehrberg; Brodie (named after a ski area, not a basketball player) lives in Belchertown, Mass. with Wendy and Ray LaRocque; Abby lives in Dedham, Mass. with Theresa and Brad Peterson and Ziggy lives in Northampton, Mass. with Janet and Abby Waxman-Grunwald.

It was Janet Waxman-Grunwald who noticed that the puppies all have a little kink at the ends of their tails, which she referred to as the "piggy twist." She believes the puppies sense their connection to one

another.

At dog parks, Abby Waxman-Grunwald said, Ziggy barks all the time as she cavorts with the other dogs. "She hasn't barked at all today," she noted. "In fact, none of them has."

The owners of three of the dogs - Carlyle, Ziggy and Brodie - have brought their pups together before, owing to their closer proximity. For the other five pups - plus another owned by the Juilianos and two owned by Pam Walter of Newport, R.I. - who provides foster care for Labs4Rescue dogs in transition -it was party time.

Deb Cook of Killingworth showed up not with a puppy, but with a carrot cake for the dogs. She coordinates the transporting for Labs4Rescue of an average of 30 to 40 dogs a week from the south to the Northeast. "It's a lot of work, but it's worth it," Cook said.

The network had its modest beginning two years ago this summer, when Cathy Mahle of Killingworth noticed a posting on an internet Labrador Retriever discussion group from a woman in Memphis, asking if someone would please adopt two Labrador puppies from a local shelter. There was a picture attached. Mahle, the owner of two mix-Labs, was intrigued, then horrified to learn that the shelter in question put down an average of 30 to 40 dogs a day.

When a woman in Maine said she wanted to adopt the two dogs, Mahle helped organize a "transport" for them - organizing drivers along the route to do about 100 miles each, and hand off the dogs to the next - 18 drivers in all.

Mahle didn't stop there. Using the same "bucket brigade" approach to transporting the dogs to homes in the Northeast, the group was saving three to six dogs a month. With interest and sophistication in the web postings growing, the network has saved more than 1,000 Labradors or mix-breed Labs in the past 13 months. They now have a large-scale transportation system, utilizing a professional dog transporter and her air-conditioned van.

The group has been criticized for bringing dogs in from southern states when there are dogs available for adoption from area shelters. Mahle said there are few pure-bred or even mix-breed Labs available in shelters in the Northeast, and that saving the dogs they do helps keep business away from the "puppy mills," while satisfying a demand for a popular breed.

Politics and debate were absent from Saturday's event. Happy owners and apparently happy puppies were having a good time. Most of the time, anyway.

When puppy play at one point got out of hand with a bit of snarling and one dog down, Gene Juiliano hollered from his perch on the deck, "Whatsamatta here? You're all family!"

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MEMBERS of a litter of 17 Labrador-Dalmatian mix puppies romp Saturday at a reunion attended by eight of them in Granby. Offering treats is Abby Waxman-Grunwald of Northampton, Mass., who came with her puppy. Nine littermates were rescued this spring in Tennessee by the group Labs4Rescue; the other eight already had homes. (PATRICK RAYCRAFT)

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