

Labs4Rescue Dog Reunion

Labrador Beach Island Goes to the Dogs

He is your friend, your partner, your defender, your dog.

You are his life, his love, his leader.

He will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of his heart.

You owe it to him to be worthy of such devotion. —Unknown

It's a dog's life on Long Beach Island as the population of Labrador retrievers is growing as a direct result of rescue efforts by volunteers through Labs4Rescue.

A dozen local L4R dogs recently gathered at the Long Beach Township municipal ball field to celebrate their newfound common bond as island dogs. From eight months to eight years old, the dogs in shades of black, yellow and chocolate frolicked and fearlessly faced their new lives in a beach heaven.

Labs4Rescue is a nonprofit organization whose primary mission is to find homes for unwanted dogs. The group is based in Connecticut and has found homes for more than 8,000 labs since 2002 in 34 states.

"This is a great moment to capture," said Leslie Houston, owner of L4R rescued dog Ranger and organizer of the photo shoot.

During the gathering of LBI L4R pups one thing was clear, the dogs have left their pasts behind them.

Laura McConnell is responsible for intercepting a number of the local rescues from impending doom. McConnell is the president/founder of the Woodlands Dog Park Club in Texas and the new offshoot group Save Our Southern Labs. The group works with L4R and does local adoptions. "L4R is a great lab rescue in the Northeast and has a wonderful network of Lab lovers," said McConnell.

"Our goal is to serve to promote not only better, healthier lives for the pets but also to educate and to promote a better existence for the homeless animals," she said.

Since June 2007, the Woodlands club has saved more than 410 labs and lab mixes and 360 have gone north through the L4R partnership.

In the month of September, 1,500 dogs and cats entered the Montgomery County Animal Shelter north of Houston. "A harsh economy has seen many owner surrenders as well as strays," said McConnell. Currently there are 17 purebred lab and lab mixes in the shelter. "Due to lack of funds and foster homes, many will not be saved," she said.

"The southern states have a hor-



Jack Reynolds

PANT-EMONIUM: Local dogs that share the common bond of being rescued from neglect in the Deep South unite for some carefree fun.

rific problem with pet overpopulation in local shelters. Lack of spay/neuter legislation, lack of licensing and the practice of selling puppies and kittens on the roadsides all are issues that need to be addressed," she explained. "The general attitude by many rural folks is that animals are disposable, and this is the problem that rescuers face in many southern states."

Judy Howard and Jean Gundling of Beach Haven are steady local volunteers and were at the ball field gathering with Zeus and Finn, respectively.

"It is a great feeling to see a contact made and end up with an adoption," said Houston. Houston and Howard do local home visits to match dog and person. Howard also fostered Princess Phoebe, who attended the celebration with owner Mark Fennell of West Creek. Howard will be getting a new foster ready for adoption on Thursday.

McConnell and Houston both reflected on endearing stories of dog rescues that have made them even more dedicated to the cause.

"I pulled two dogs from a Camden shelter this summer for L4R, both chocolates and just awesome dogs," said Houston. Howard assisted Houston in getting immediate medi-

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cal attention to these dogs. "Amelia was adopted and Buddy finally healed from his terrible leg wound (he almost lost his leg) and is in a foster home now. He may be 10 but acts like a 5-year-old. This rescue experience was a turning point for me; this is really what it is about."

McConnell started as a volunteer in a high kill shelter in 2007. "I was in the hallway of the shelter and a yellow lab came running toward me and collapsed in front of me," she recalled. "He had run out of the euthanasia room but had already been given the injection. In tears I asked why? As the staff member was literally dragging him back, half alive. 'Because he was not

vaccinated in the three-day period' is what she said.

"That lab was not sick; he was just over some insane time frame. I went to the manager and argued over this policy, sobbing for this dog," she continued.

Three days later in a chance encounter, McConnell met a man named Randy Heaton who suggested they start saving labs. "I said, 'Where do we sign up?'" Heaton and his wife, Barbara Sands, had at that time personally saved 75 labs and had been working with Ann Hilchey with Labs4Rescue. The connection was made.

"The outreach and providing info of fosters is so important," said Houston. "The more fosters, the more labs that can be saved."

Social networks such as Facebook are used as a tool to assist in the effort. "I post available dogs for others to see and try to encourage adoptions," said Houston. "Word of mouth is still our best advertisement."

Houston has customized her own rolling billboard advertisement by transforming her recreational vehicle into the "lab cab." "I recently received an e-mail from the home visit coordinator who said an adopter found out about L4R after

seeing my RV," she said. "They just adopted a lovely chocolate. Now that makes it all worth it."

The road trip to safety comes from near and far. Those lucky few that take the long road with L4R arrive in Pluckemin from the Allentown, Pa., and Nanuet, N.Y., drop-off locations.

Rescue Road Trips is the transport service for rescue dogs from the Deep South. Its goal is to "improve the lives of northern families while saving southern dogs."

"We provide loving, humane road trips for homeless, unwanted, unloved dogs facing assured immediate death from southern kill shelters. We help move them to loving forever homes in New England and surrounding areas," said Greg Mahle, director of Rescue Road Trips.

The truck leaves Ohio on Tuesdays and travels through Georgia, Texas, Louisiana and Tennessee to pick up pups from foster homes. It makes deliveries to waiting families in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and New Hampshire on Saturdays. The crew heads back home on Sundays.

Their mission is complete.

—Angela Andersen
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