

Trekking 4,200-miles across the country, there's no distance too far to save man's best friend



Advocate staff photo by APRIL BUFFINGTON -- Greg Mahle holds Zoey, a lab mix that he picked up at Animal Companion Hospital in Hammond, to transport north for adoption.

By george morris

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HAMMOND — Greg Mahle climbed down from the cab of his 18-wheeler looking like an extra from “Smokey and the Bandit.” He sported a 4-day growth of stubble, and when he took off his ball cap, it appeared he must have spent the night sleeping in the trailer.

Which, by the way, he had. With about 60 of his friends.

Every other week, Mahle’s [Rescue Road Trips](#) truck pulls up to the Companion Animal Hospital as part of a weeklong, 4,200-mile trip that starts and ends in Zanesville, Ohio.

He picks up dogs that otherwise might be euthanized and takes them to families that want them.

“I love the dogs more than anything,” Mahle said. “I love being with the dogs. For so many years of my life I spent so much time chasing a dollar. Now, I don’t make a dime doing this. I really don’t. But you can close your eyes and sleep at night really well. You know that you’ve helped.

“I haven’t really helped the pet overpopulation any at all, but I’ve helped the dogs that I can see and that I can feel and touch. I’ve helped them.”

Mahle, 52, has been doing this for the past 10 years. He had owned restaurants, but closed them and was planning on living at his family’s farm until he received an emergency request from his sister, Cathy, who had founded **Labs4rescue** in Connecticut. A driver bringing dogs was exhausted, and he was near where Mahle lived. Mahle helped drive the rest of the way and started learning the regional aspect of pet overpopulation.

Warm winters and lax breeder regulations in the South result in many dogs in high-kill shelters, he said. The opposite has led to a short supply of adoptable dogs in the North.

He started his rescue runs, developing a route that picks up dogs beginning in Memphis, then south to Jackson, Mississippi, west to Fort Worth, Texas, south to Austin, Texas, and east to Slidell before catching Interstate 59 to Chattanooga, Tennessee. There are pickup points in between, including Lafayette and Baton Rouge.

Deliveries extend through 10 states as far north as Manchester, New Hampshire, before heading back toward Ohio. His motto is “Saving lives 4 paws at a time.”

Mahle started with rented minivans, then a box truck, then a small truck and trailer. Four years ago, he bought his current big rig.

“I can remember buying this truck and they got it home ... and I can remember walking out in my driveway and just being scared of this big, huge thing,” he said. “I’m supposed to drive this? I’d never even been in one.”

He learned. The truck allows him to transport an average of 80 dogs, each in its own kennel.

He brings along someone to help with the drive. Mahle sleeps each night in the trailer with the dogs. In addition to picking up the dogs and delivering them, there are stops to walk the dogs and give them attention. Volunteers — Mahle calls them “angels” —

show up at various points to help. He's always seeking more angels.

"It's really helpful to the dog, the more people that put their hands on it," he said. "When we do finally get to the adopter, the dog is really well-adjusted. From being in the restaurant business, I can tell you 50 percent of the battle is won or lost when the plate hits your table. Right there. Same is true with the dog. Fifty percent of the battle is won or lost when that dog gets out and goes into the adopter's arms. So, I want everything to be as perfect as I can make it."

He said he has done this for more than 55,000 dogs over the past decade. Donations allow Rescue Road Trips, a nonprofit organization, to provide the dogs for a \$185 fee. Between 1,000 and 2,000 have come from Hammond's Companion Animal Hospital.

"He really is just a nice guy," said Katie Shurtz, CAH office manager. "He's quick, but he still manages to be sweet and kind to the dogs. Even though he's always in a little bit of a rush, he's never, like, 'Come on. Hurry up. Get on the truck.' He tries to make the dog feel comfortable."

Rescue Road Trips have gotten their share of attention, including a book this year, "Rescue Road" by Peter Zheutlin.

For Mahle, the payoff comes when families finally get to meet the dogs they've adopted.

"It's extremely rewarding," Mahle said. "There's so much heartbreak in rescue. There really is. Trudge into any shelter and pull a dog and look at the dogs you couldn't take with you. Rescue will show you the worst side of humans and what we can do to animals.

"But you can't focus on that. You've got to focus on the little things and your little victories. Putting that dog into someone's arms and seeing them happy, you know that you've helped them in their life and you've helped that dog."

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