

MALDEN OBSERVER

Young: The joy of finding a friend for life

By **Elizabeth M. Young**/ Sitting In
Friday, August 25, 2006

It's a sunny warm August day and the commuter park and ride lot off of Route 93 looks pretty much like any other boring piece of asphalt. What is unusual about this day is it is transport day and individuals and families are milling around and anxiously awaiting the trailer that will bring dogs, all eagerly awaiting to start new lives in new homes with loving families.

Most of these people, like me, chose to adopt a "rescue dog" instead of buying a puppy. Some adopt because work and family schedules make it tough to adopt a puppy, some feel it is important to save these dogs from rural Southern and Midwestern high-kill shelters and some just love dogs and want to do a good deed.

When my Labrador retriever Emily passed away this spring, I was, like many longtime pet owners, devastated. She was 12 and had developed a fatal heart condition, and even though I know she had led a good life and had been a great companion, it truly did not ease the pain. I missed the sound of her tags jingling as she moved around and it was very sad coming home each day to an empty house.

It was at this point I began surfing the Internet and I was surprised to find what seems like millions of homeless and needy pets all just begging for a good home. Shelters near and far had Web sites and there were countless breed specific rescue groups. I was entering a whole new and often heart-wrenching realm.

I read books and articles and finally settled on working with a Labrador retriever rescue group. There are several reputable groups in the New England area and I ultimately began working with Labs4Rescue based out of Killingworth, Conn. Labs4Rescue is an outstanding group of volunteers working from Tennessee to all over New England who are committed to giving Labradors and Lab mixes a second chance in loving homes.

Some Labs are surrendered, but most come from high-kill shelters in the South and Midwest. Before Labs4Rescue volunteers post dogs for adoption they make sure the dog is healthy and happy. The dogs undergo a veterinarian screening and are spayed/neutered, and then they are placed in foster homes where they are assessed for temperament and behavior. All the dogs are vaccinated, received heartworm and flea prevention and are treated for any prevailing health conditions. Before fostering or adoption takes place a volunteer goes to the home of the prospective family to make sure they have the proper space for the dog and asks them critical questions to make sure that a rescue dog adoption is the right choice both for the family and the animal they adopt or foster.

After I filled out an online form and paid my \$15 non-refundable fee, I combed through the endless profiles on their Web pages to find the right match. Each dog had a photo or two and usually a story that would bring a tear to even the toughest guy's eye. It was sometimes overwhelming and at times just downright depressing. I had concerns about adopting a dog I had never met, but those fears were eased after my first phone call.

Shortly after submitting my application I started to get phone calls and e-mails from the volunteer coordinators for the dogs that I had indicated I was interested in. I discovered that each dog has a person who coordinates its foster care, transportation and ultimate adoption. These volunteers were polite, knowledgeable, supportive and truly wanted to help me find just the right dog.

Labs4Rescue has put in place a "foster-to-adopt" process that allows families to foster their prospective dog for two weeks before they have to commit to the adoption, if the dog is not the right match, the group works to find a better match for the dog and the family fosters the dog until that happens. Families can either choose to find another dog or have their adoption fee refunded.

When I finally picked the perfect candidate, a 3-year-old female black Labrador Retriever, there was a whirlwind of paperwork and e-mails. The dog I finally selected was an owner surrender, the couple was divorcing and the dog was too much trouble. The Labs4Rescue coordinator told me that when they went to get her they found out she had been tied up outside and sleeping under the porch in the dirt. She had skin and coat issues and had never been spayed. Labs4Rescue picked her up, put her in a loving foster home, had her spayed and got her back to good health. Upon hearing her story, I was sold, she sounded like a dog how could use a good friend.

I sent in my \$350 adoption fee and anxiously awaited her arrival. I was like a mother-to-be with a list of things to do and buy. Since my last dog had been older she didn't need a crate, so I had to get a new one, I wanted to make sure the new dog had the proper food and would have not only Emily's old toys but some new ones as well. I started investigating obedience classes and made an introductory appointment for the new dog with my veterinarian.

Finally the day arrived, I drove up on a beautiful Saturday afternoon waiting with over dozen other adults and children for the transport trailer to arrive. As each furry friend was brought off the truck, people broke out into smiles and happy voices. There were children frolicking with excitable puppies and young dogs and adult dogs with trepidation gently greeting new owners. The driver smiles as he hands off each dog and their information packet to the adopters.

I'm not sure how each of the dogs have fared in their new home, but I can tell you there is a 3-year-old Lab who now enjoys lounging around the house on one of her several doggie beds and has recently discovered the joy of swiping a slice of pizza off the counter when no one is looking. We have some work to do together, I have just signed us up for obedience classes this fall, but from the first day she has been a great dog.

I decided to call her Dory, and she doesn't have to sleep under a porch anymore or worry about someone giving her up because it is convenient, she has a home for the long haul and I have a beautiful new companion.

If you think rescue adoption is for you, I highly recommend it. If you are looking for a breed specific rescue group check out the American Kennel Club Web site at www.akc.org and click on the Future Dog Owners tab for a link to rescue groups. If you are interested in learning more about Labs4Rescue, check out the Web site at www.labs4rescue.com or at PO Pox 955, Killingworth, CT 06419. Their slogan is "Save a Lab, have a friend for life!"

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