

Rescuer of homeless pups finds compassion runs coast to coast

By Sheila Stroup, The Times-Picayune

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This story begins with two puppies found next to a dumpster in the parking lot of the Covington Popeyes on U.S. 190, a busy highway.

"They were two big fine chocolate-Lab looking puppies, about 9 weeks old," Ellen Berry said. "They were just running the street, and I knew we couldn't leave them there."

So she and her husband, Lamar, loaded up the pups and took them to their home in Covington.

It was just before Mardi Gras, and they were leaving town, so Berry called the St. Tammany Humane Society to see if she could take them there.

"They said they were full. It was Mardi Gras, and I thought, 'What am I going to do with these puppies?'" Berry said.

She called her veterinarian, Rusty Maher, who told her he didn't really have room, but he'd find a spot for them.

"He was an angel, taking those puppies in after hours, when he had a full boarding clinic and was heading out of town himself," Berry said.

She listed the puppies on Craig's List, and by the time Helen Calmes, a New Orleanian who works with [Labs4rescue](#), e-mailed her, Berry had already found great homes for them.

"I told her, 'But I have a border collie I pulled from a shelter. Do you know of anyone who could help her?'" Berry said.

Calmes gave her the name of Fran Borges in Lafayette, who rescues all kinds of dogs. And Borges told Berry she knew someone in Houston who rescues border colliers.

"So Karoline Carlson in Houston posted the border collie on her Web site and found a wonderful home for her in Orlando, Fla.," Berry said. "I'm just blown away by how dedicated and organized these rescue people are."

When I asked Berry if she is a chronic rescuer herself, she said, "Chronic sounds like a disease, but it's definitely a chronic calling."

And she admitted that she and Lamar have a houseful of dogs, thanks to that calling.

"He says they're not rescued dogs. They're family dogs," she said. "Thank goodness he has a compassionate heart."

The man who plays a crucial role in this story is Cary Page. Page picks up dogs wherever they are rescued and takes them to their new homes.

"He was in Minnesota when he found out about the border collie," Berry said.

Page had picked up two blue heelers in Minnesota who were scheduled to be euthanized. He took them to Houston, stopping in Shreveport on the way to pick up a border collie named Sam, who was also on death row.

"He dropped Sam and the blue heelers in Houston and picked up another lost soul in Lafayette and dropped that dog off in Prairieville," Berry said. "I met him at 12:30 Friday night just off the Interstate outside Covington."

Page took Lila, the border collie, from Berry, and headed home to Lillian, Ala., a "little tiny town" not far from Pensacola, Fla.

When I caught up with him by phone, Lila was sleeping on his bed at his mother's house. And Page, 47, explained how he had become an animal courier.

"About a year ago, I lost my job," he said.

He was production manager at a wholesale nursery, and when the economy took a downturn, so did plant sales.

"Actually, I was kind of relieved," he said. "I really didn't like what I was doing, but I was making too much money to quit. Somehow, I feel like grace stepped in."

His sister in Vicksburg, Miss., had been involved in animal rescue after Hurricane Katrina, and that's when Page got interested in rescue work.

As soon as he lost his job, he started looking for another one, but nothing materialized.

"I got tired of having people say, 'We'll give you a call' and then never hearing back from them," he said. "I asked myself, 'What can you do with what you have?'"

He had a car, a desire to see the country and a great love for dogs, so in September he began transporting rescued dogs to their new homes for the price of gas money and living expenses. And unlike potential employers, animal rescuers are always calling him.

"I've been so busy with phone calls and e-mails and trips, I tell my friends, 'I work more now than I ever did when I was making a salary,'" he said.

And he has had the chance to see a lot of the country.

"I've been to Pennsylvania, North Dakota, Texas, South Carolina -- all over the place," he said. "Since September, I've taken 127 dogs to their new homes."

Page, who separated from his wife around the time he lost his job, stays with his mother in Alabama when he's not traveling.

"She's not in the best health, so I shop for her and take care of her when I'm here," he said.

She fell over the weekend, and she's having trouble getting around, so Page is staying with her this week. As soon as his sister arrives, he and the border collie will head for Orlando. In the meantime, Lila is making herself at home in Lillian.

"She's real protective of Mama," Page said. "We're enjoying having her here."

Page says the best part of his calling is seeing "just wonderful scenery" and "meeting a lot of great dogs."

"I'm doing something I love now, and that means a lot," he said. "There's not much money in it, but at least I can follow my heart."

With lots of networking and little fanfare, rescuers across the country follow their hearts and save lives every day.

"For me, it was just one person who led me to another who led me to another," Berry said. "I feel like I've been surrounded by angels, who will do anything to help these dogs."