

Bo's Forever Home

My husband and I had been debating for weeks whether to adopt a second dog to be a companion to our neurotic lab mix, Guinness. But when we saw the picture and description for "Bo" on Petfinder.com, we knew he was the one.

"Yellow lab/golden retriever mix, 3 to 4 years old," the write-up said. "Photo doesn't do him justice. A perfect gentleman and total mush. Knows basic commands. Housebroken. Rides well in the car. Walks great on a leash. Loves everyone. Will make a great companion."

Having been through puppy-hood with Guinness (Did I mention she was neurotic?), the thought of bringing home a dog that already seemed to know the ropes was very appealing. It turned out Bo was being fostered near the college where I worked (this was before Labs4Rescue). After grilling his foster mom and being assured that Bo was as special and amazing and wonderful as he sounded on paper, it was time to set up a meeting.

Bo's foster mom and I chose to meet at the college, which neither dog could claim as his or her territory. I brought Guinness with me to work that day with the scary words from my husband echoing in my ears: "If you like Bo, and if he and Guinness get along, bring him on home!"

The meeting couldn't have gone better for the furry ones, who romped around and acted as if they had been reunited after years of separation. Bo was certainly well behaved, even if he was a bit goopy and gross. Barrel-chested, with skinny long legs and overgrown nails, he literally flapped when he ran. As one friend of mine would later put it, Bo "looked like he was put together by committee."

I chalked up his odd appearance to the sad story his foster mom told me. "According to the shelter he came from, he had a good home up until a month or so ago. We suspect his owner either went into a nursing home or died, and no one was willing or able to care for him. So he went to the shelter, where he waited for a new home. But with so many puppies, he just kept getting overlooked. He was 24 hours away from being euthanized when we pulled him out of there and got him into a foster home."

Obviously, he had been neglected for quite some time. But when he and Guinness curled up next to each other for the 40-minute car ride home, Guinness with her head on Bo's rump—I knew he'd found his forever home.

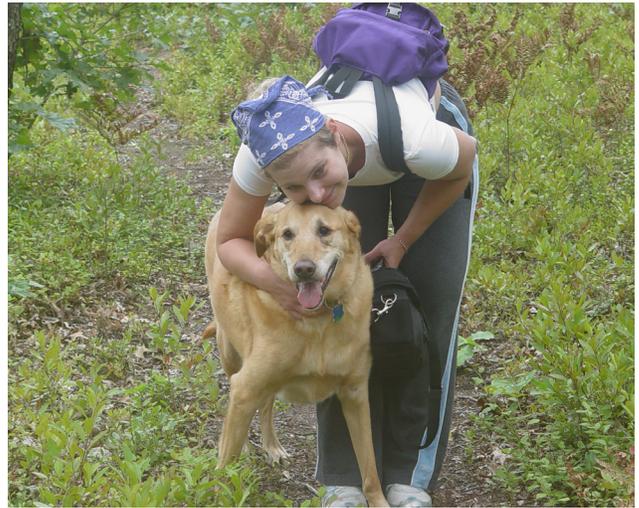
We got the first hint that forever is a relative term when we took Bo to his first vet appointment. "How old is he?" the doctor asked. "Three or 4," my husband answered proudly. "Really?" she asked, poking and prodding him. "Well, his teeth are in excellent shape. I guess he could be 3 or 4. Maybe he needs to lose some weight."

In retrospect, I don't think she had the heart to tell us, two relatively inexperienced dog owners, that Bo was quite a bit older than advertised.

Whatever his age or weight issues, Bo fit perfectly into our lives. Guinness adored him, and he tried not to get too annoyed when she ran a giant loop around our front yard to crash into him broadside. We loved him to bits, and he loved us right back. He'd lope around the neighborhood with us, off leash, chasing deer and eating bugs. If he disappeared into the woods for a little while in search of whatever smell it was that caught his attention, all we'd have to do is call out, "Here, Bo! Let's go!" and he'd come running right back. He just wanted to be with us—so much so that if my husband or I got out of bed at night to read or poke around on the computer, Bo would bolt upright in bed, make an almost-human noise like one my mom often made when I was first learning to drive, and scamper out of the room after whoever got up to leave.

An ear infection several months later brought us back to the vet's office and a new doctor who looked at us in disbelief when we repeated that Bo was 3 or 4. "Well, maybe 5 or 6," he told us as we went over his charts. What's a year, my husband and I asked ourselves, as long as he's happy and healthy?

The Prednisone Bo was taking for the infection had a tremendous impact on something we hadn't noticed before. Bo had gone from being a stiff, somewhat awkward dog to a gazelle. Well, almost.



Bo on Martha's Vineyard in 2004

(continued)

When I asked yet another new doctor at our vet practice about Bo's change in behavior, we moved into new diagnostic territory—arthritis and hip dysplasia, usually seen in senior dogs but possible for a dog Bo's age, which had crept up to 6 or 7 when the doctor noticed the slight fog of cataracts in his eyes. Still, Bo responded positively to treatment, and everyone was happy, especially him.

We had Bo just over a year when we took him and Guinness to Martha's Vineyard, a little slice of heaven for dogs and doggie parents alike. Bo proved himself to be the perfect gentleman yet again when we encountered a skunk at dusk our first night there. While Guinness chased the critter and goaded it into shooting her right between the eyes, Bo danced out of the fray, clearly being the wiser of the two dogs.



Bo and Guinness at the park.

With Bo just beginning to lose weight thanks to a new diet, we wanted to get him and Guinness as much exercise as possible. Short walks and romps on the beach led to hours in the surf and, ultimately, a five-mile walk downtown that left Bo asleep on the couch for two days. That worried us a bit. But what worried us even more was when this dog—who on his first night with us walked through a Petsmart and ate, right off the bottom shelf, a doggie burger wrapped in cellophane—stopped eating.

It took a while to get a clear diagnosis once we returned home. Yet another new doctor (we've since changed veterinary practices) gave us yet another new estimate for Bo's age—9 or 10. After weeks of antibiotics and blood work, we got the grim news. It was most likely cancer.

My husband and I were devastated. We wanted an expert opinion and drove Bo an hour-and-a-half away to an oncologist who confirmed our worst fears. Not only was treatment useless at this point given the aggressiveness of the leukemia and lymphoma and given Bo's age, which the oncologist estimated to be 12 or 13, but, even worse, he was suffering.

We were ready to spend any amount of money necessary to make Bo better, but in the end, without saying it outright, the oncologist helped us determine what the next, most humane step should be. We held him in our arms and sobbed uncontrollably as he went to sleep.

For weeks I was in a bottomless funk, angry about how cruel and unfair it was to have had Bo in our lives for such a short period of time. He was with us only a year-and-a-half, and during that time he had aged 9 human years! He made every day better, and it wasn't right that we wouldn't have that anymore.

It was my sister who gave me my first ray of hope. "It was too short a time," she said. "But think of how happy he was. You gave him the greatest gift anyone could give him—a happy, safe home with people who loved him to bits."

Then my friend, the one who told me Bo looked like he had been put together by committee, sent me an e-mail message that I still keep tucked in my journal. After I told her that Bo had passed, she wrote:

"You and Bo meant the world to each other. I don't think I've ever seen such an equally balanced mutual admiration society. I hope the memories of how happy he was just to be with you will help you through. You gave him a good life and you were always there when he needed you. And you loved him as much as he adored you."

So, if we had it to do all over again, knowing now what we didn't know then, would we even have considered bringing a senior dog like Bo into our lives? Yes! Yes! YES!

Thank goodness we didn't know any better. Because, by unknowingly diving into territory we otherwise would have avoided, we changed the life of a very special guy—and he changed our lives right back.

Please consider adopting a senior dog. It will change your life!