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Wanted: Good Homes

By: M. ENGLISH , For The Sunday Edition

Labs4Rescue places dogs with loving families

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The Westminster Kennel Club's recent Annual Dog Show at New York's Madison Square Garden - its 130th - highlighted dozens of the canine world's shining stars.

By WKC standards, Mischa Gannon - a 22-pound Lab-corgi mix - is a nobody. Don't tell that to 10-year-old Evan Gannon. The Plymouth Meeting boy is Mischa's proud owner. And the personable year-old pooch may not be the stuff of Westminster. But in Evan's book, she's better.

Mischa's arrival even inspired one of the Colonial Elementary School fourth-grader's writing assignments:

"Last summer I got a new dog. I sprang outside to see her. She looked like a vanilla and chocolate scoop with legs. She came charging at me. Instead of a kiss, I got a nip the size of Mount Everest.

"Later that day, my relatives came to see her. We changed her name to Mischa. Then Mischa and I played fetch. We played until our legs fell off.

"When everyone left, we went inside, and Mischa chewed on a bone. I love her very much. That was the day I got Mischa."

The new arrival joined the Gannons' Black Lab Cocoa, who recently turned two. The family, which also includes Evan's parents, Heather and David, and four-year-old sister, Rachel, took Mischa's original name - Cocoa Puff - as a good omen but changed it to avoid confusion.

According to Heather, the ensuing months have passed in a poignant whirl of puppy love, all the more so because Mischa had come North from a southern shelter where she "almost certainly would have been killed" if volunteers from Labs4Rescue, a non-profit group based in Killingworth, Conn., hadn't stepped in.

The group reports it has placed "over 3,500" Labs and Lab mixes in adoptive homes since it was established in 2002. Not surprisingly, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita intensified the need for adoptive homes.

"My family adopted in August, my sister in September and my neighbor in October," says Heather, who is talking up the establishment of a Pennsylvania chapter of Labs4Rescue.

"I've done a few home visits for them, and right now I'm just trying to get the word out. These are wonderful, gorgeous pure and part-Labs that really make great family pets, and from the research I did on rescue dogs before we adopted, I was really impressed with this organization."

Heather discovered Labs4Rescue as she surfed the Web looking for a dog for sister Wendy Hill and nieces Kelsey, 15, and Nicole, 12, of Worcester.

"What we've learned is, there are numerous high-kill shelters in the South where people take these dogs or, in many cases, just abandon them when they're done with them," she says.

"These shelters usually hold the dogs for three days at the most before they kill them. Some of these dogs are starving and ill, and they're usually kept in pretty inhumane conditions before they're killed.

"Labs are very popular in the South for hunting. So you have (disreputable) people who, basically, operate puppy mills. They don't spay the dogs, so you keep getting all these new litters and end up with this huge number of animals in the shelters. The dogs are so numerous that a lot of people just abandon them at the end of hunting season.

"My sister's dog had just died, and I was very impressed with what I read about this group...about all the different evaluations and treatments they do before they actually place dogs in a home.

"They also do home visits and follow-ups to make sure all the various family members are on board with the dog and to make sure the dog's adjusting to the family. They're truly interested in placing the right dog with the right family.

"The whole thing was very impressive. That's why we decided to take a dog ourselves. We adopted Mischa in August. Wendy adopted a yellow Lab named Ryder a month after us, and our neighbor adopted in October.

"I know there are smaller Lab rescue groups in the area. But as far as I know, none of them approach the size of Labs4Rescue. Labs are just such terrific dogs, too. They're known as good family dogs, and they're great with children."

For his part, Evan's just grateful his family found Mischa.

"I think anybody would like her," he says. "She's a little shy when people first come over. She might go and hide in her crate at first, but she just needs time to get used to you. I'm happy we got her. Cocoa needed a playmate... even though their personalities are exactly the opposite."

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Heather says Labs4Rescue counters critics who object to "importing" Labrador retrievers to Northeast homes with data about the breed's enormous popularity. Last month, the American Kennel Club announced Labrador retrievers continue to be the most popular AKC-registered dog in the nation.

Acquiring a Labs4Rescue dog entails a \$15 application fee and a \$350 adoption fee. The latter includes pre-adoption veterinary screening and treatment as well as delivery. Labs4Rescue specifies all adoptive dogs "have been vaccinated, spayed (or) neutered, started on heart worm prevention and have received treatment for any prevailing medical or health conditions."

Lab-lovers willing to foster a dog are also in high demand. So are cash donations for food, collars and related supplies. Additional information is available at www.labs4rescue.com.



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