

# Sun Journal

## A special pet

By **Lindsay Tice**, Staff Writer  
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LEWISTON - Sue Ray fell in love with Harley over the Internet.

It was 2005 and Ray's cat had just died, and for the first time she found she had room in her life for a dog, a chocolate Labrador.

Petfinder.com listed more than 600 chocolate Labs available for adoption from rescue groups and animal shelters across the country. The soulful Labs4rescue photo of Harley - then named John Henry - made her melt.

"He just had these eyes that said 'I need to come home with you,'" she said.

The little green heart icon next to his name indicated "special needs pet." She paused at that. Briefly.

"I thought 'Oh man,'" she said. "But I had to click on him."

Abandoned in West Virginia, Harley had been hit by a car and left without medical care for months. A farmer found him caked with dirt, malnourished, infected and injured, his right front paw severely damaged and atrophied. Connecticut-based Labs4rescue took over his care.

Soon after, his damaged leg was amputated.

When Ray showed interest in him, Labs4rescue warned her he would not be a normal dog. They gave her a list of do's and don'ts, including don't expect him to navigate stairs, don't expect him to run and play fetch, do safeguard him constantly.

Ray wasn't deterred.

About a month after she applied to adopt him, Harley arrived at her Auburn home. She very quickly realized that the rescue group's he's-not-a-normal-dog warnings were wrong.

"I had a room, a sun room, that I converted into the dog's room. I had put a baby gate up and he ripped it out with his teeth in two hours," Ray said. "He did not want to be confined in that room, so he ripped it right out of the wall."

Soon, Harley was running around, playing fetch and going up and down stairs. When Ray added a second dog to the family, a Lab-boxer mix named Chenoa, Harley learned from his new sister an additional skill: digging holes in the backyard.

A couple of years ago, the easygoing, attention-loving Lab became a therapy dog. Once a week, on her day off as an assistant deli manager for Hannaford in Lewiston, Ray takes him through Central Maine Medical Center to visit patients.

The two- to three-hour tour could take a lot less time, but visitors, patients and medical staff stop Harley every few feet to say hello.

"He has his own following," Ray said.

For some patients, a Harley visit is more than just a chance to pet a cute dog. It's motivation to overcome their own adversities.

If an abused, three-legged Lab can keep his enthusiastic spirit, they figure, so can they.

"People say 'Aw.' Does he look 'Aw?'" Ray said. "He's like 'Yay!'"

Have an idea for a pet feature? Contact Lindsay Tice at 689-2854 or e-mail her at [ltice@sunjournal.com](mailto:ltice@sunjournal.com)

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