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'A truckload of happiness': Allentown Angels help deliver shelter dogs

Allentown Angels help man who delivers shelter dogs into loving arms

By [Ryan Kneller](#), Of The Morning Call

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It's 7 p.m. on a recent Friday, and 30-plus Allentown Angels stand ready to serve a pack of restless pooches in a parking lot in Fogelsville. advertisement

The dogs are in crates stacked two or three high and secured to the interior walls of a tractor trailer. They are traveling north via Rescue Road Trips, a transport service that moves them from high-kill shelters in the South to New England, where there is more demand for shelter dogs.

Before the truck arrives, the volunteers line the sidewalk with trash receptacles and water-filled bowls. They gather plastic bags for collecting waste and prepare to dispense treats, belly rubs and lots of love.

It's a scene that the volunteers, many wearing Allentown Angels T-shirts, re-enact every other Friday at the Comfort Inn lot, regardless of weather.

Rescue Road Trips owner Greg Mahle "brings a truckload of happiness," says Trexlertown's Jackie Tercha, who has been aiding the operation for about five years in between jobs at Hamilton Animal Care in Trexlertown and K-9 Kampus in Fogelsville. "You never go home in a bad mood."

Because of rain and traffic, Mahle and his driver, Bill, pull into the lot a little later than normal — around 7:30 p.m. The crowd erupts with cheers and applause before lining up to walk the 65 dogs.

From the trailer's side door, Mahle announces the leashed dogs as if they were part of an all-star basketball team before handing them over to the walkers.

"Charlie! Tucker! Bambi!" he yells out over the loud barking. "Latte! Paige! Wynonna!"

Smiles abound as both the volunteers and canines are happy to take a stroll with a new friend.

"You're a good girl!" Tercha says, feeding treats to a brown pup named Dixie.

"All of these dogs are so sweet," says Adele Fagan of Orefield, while giving water to a brown and white hound named Baby. "I'd take any one of them home."

Fagan did just that on May 2 when she took home a black Lab, Abby, through a Rescue Road Trips delivery.

The adoption was set up through [Labs4rescue](#), a Connecticut nonprofit that providing new lives for rescued

or displaced Labrador retrievers or Labrador mixes.

The truck does not always make deliveries at the Fogelsville stop. On this particular trip, just one dog, a gray schnauzer named Toonie, was being picked up.

While some of the dogs coming out of the trailer are composed, a majority have bottled-up energy.

"You're so rambunctious!" exclaims 20-year-old Alexa Harry of Walnutport, while trying to control Otto, a young black Lab mix.

Harry labels herself a "true animal lover." She adopted two German shepherd mixes, Chai (from Animals in Distress in Coopersburg) and Chase (from Peaceable Kingdom in Whitehall Township).

"I'm just happy to help these dogs get their own happy endings," she says.

Most of the volunteers assist with "walk-potty-snack" breaks. But Anita Patterson of Lower Macungie and Maureen Keenan of Coopersburg are on duty inside the trailer — cleaning, sanitizing and lining the crates with fresh newspaper.

"We're excited to give them a fresh environment to return to," says Patterson, who owns two rescued dogs herself — a blind miniature bull terrier named Panda and a miniature schnauzer named Cam Newton.

Rescue Road Trips typically transports 65 to 85 rescued pooches (mostly Labs) each 4,200-mile trip. It was established nine years ago by Mahle. Since then, it has moved roughly 35,000 dogs to refuge in the Northeast.

Mahle, a former restaurateur, started the business by transporting just a handful of rescued dogs in a borrowed minivan from his home in Zanesville, Ohio. He eventually saved enough money for his own van. Now the operation uses a semi-trailer.

He travels the same six-day trek every other week — picking up pooches of every breed and size in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama — before heading north to deliver the former death-row dogs to a better life.

The meetings are set up by animal rescue groups, including Mutts4Rescue and Shaggy Dog Rescue, with each dog going to either a foster or forever home.

The business is not very profitable, Mahle says. And that is just fine by him.

"Some weeks, I'm lucky if I can make ends meet," says the 51-year-old dog lover. "But I'm content. I'm happy. And at this point in my life, happy is worth a lot more than money."

Allentown Angels coordinator Keith Remaly founded the local organization about six years ago when trying to track down the origin of his adopted black Lab, Dallas. The Forks Township resident learned the dog had been transported north via Rescue Road Trips. He checked out the company's website, which lists its schedule and pick-up/drop-off locations, and surprised Mahle with a visit.

"I just stopped by one day to see if he needed any help," Remaly says. "He said sure, and I showed up the next time with my wife. A few weeks later, we brought some friends, who then began bringing some of their own friends. It just continued to grow from there."

The group boasts more than 200 members, with 30 to 50 usually showing up every other Friday night.

And thanks to stories about Rescue Road Trips in Parade magazine and on NBC's "Today" show, even more people are eager to join the Angels' mission.

"We aren't accepting new volunteers at this time," Remaly says. "I get emails almost daily from people wanting to help, which is great. So I refer them to local animal shelters, which can always use more help."

The Angels are not alone in serving commuting canines. Other groups in Birmingham, Ala., and Rocky Hill, Conn., provide similar assistance.

Mahle says he is "incredibly appreciative" of all who lend a helping hand. He and his driver let the dogs out themselves at some stops, and the animals do not receive the same amount of attention that the Angels and other groups provide.

"When it's just us, it's strictly business," he says. "The dogs do their thing and then it's right back in the trailer."

Mahle says volunteers help socialize the dogs, increasing the odds of them staying in their new households.

"Many of these dogs are coming from very unfortunate situations, so the loving nature of these volunteers shows them that not all people are bad," he says. "They learn that hands will pet, not hit them."

After the Angels finish helping, Mahle and his driver move the vehicle across the street to the Cracker Barrel parking lot, where they sleep (Mahle in the trailer and Bill in the cabin) until 6 a.m.

Then they are off to drop-off locations in Bedminster, N.J., Spring Valley, N.Y., and the Connecticut communities of Danbury, Rocky Hill and Putnam, before heading home. (They sleep in Carlisle, Cumberland County, on Saturday night.)

Rescue Road Trips, whose tagline reads "Saving lives 4 paws at a time," has more than 38,000 "likes" on Facebook. Mahle remains humbled by the attention.

"It's a chain and we are all links," he says. "I'm the face of the operation, but there are so many people like the Allentown Angels behind the scenes."

"These people could be at home on their couch or out having a beer with a friend. Instead, they come here. There's one couple that even considers this their date night."

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