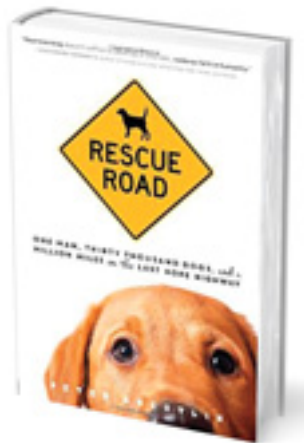


On the Road, with 80 Lucky Dogs

Interview by Jim Kennedy '75

After landing in a high-kill shelter in Louisiana, a Lab named Albie boarded a tractor-trailer to New England, and his new owner, Peter Zheutlin '75, began to wonder: Why do so many Southern dogs come north? And who are the people behind the effort? Before long, Zheutlin was on the highway, in a truck, surrounded by kennels.

Rescue Road: One Man, Thirty Thousand Dogs, and a Million Miles on the Last Hope Highway is ostensibly a book about a transport service for lost, stray and abandoned dogs, told through the lens of author Peter Zheutlin '75. He rode along in the cab of a truck that, twice a month, takes 60 to 80 dogs from the South to new “forever” homes in the Northeast. But the book is much more than



a road-trip story with dogs. It's also about the people involved, and about cultural differences between North and South. And ultimately, it's the story of the author himself, and the transformation he and his family experienced as a result of adopting Albie. In this interview, as Albie rested at his feet, Zheutlin talked about becoming a dog owner, about rescuers who “make Sophie’s choice” every day and about nights spent in the back of a tractor-trailer, wedged between two rows of kennels.

You describe your adoption of Albie as the Berlin Wall falling.

Albie came to us after a 20-year tug-of-war with my wife and kids about whether to get a dog. I was adamantly opposed: I was concerned about allergies. I was concerned about the mess and shedding fur, and about getting up in February and walking on sheets of ice so the dog could do his business. But one day I was with a friend who had a dog, and the switch flipped. I said to my wife, “All right, you can look into it.”

How did you and your family find him?

We found Albie on Petfinder.com, the Match.com of the animal world. His profile was posted by a group called [Labs4rescue](#), which is based in Connecticut. But Albie was in a high-kill shelter in

Louisiana at the time. We fell in love with him from a photo and short video.



How much did you know about rescue dogs?

If you'd asked me three years ago, I would have said that a rescue dog is a Saint Bernard in the Alps with a barrel of whiskey under its chin. The experience of adopting Albie led me to write the book. I was curious: How he had come to our home? Why are there so many Southern dogs coming north on these transports? Who were the people extending their hands and hearts to help lost souls like Albie?

The central figure in your book is Greg Mahle, who drove the tractor-trailer that brought Albie north. What got you interested in Greg?

Greg drives this truck 8,500 miles every month in two loops from his home in Ohio to the Gulf Coast and then to the Northeast. Greg makes good use of Facebook to keep people informed as their dogs are coming north. One day, when Albie was on his truck, my wife, Judy, came to me and said, "Look, it's Albie!" We were already very much attached. Greg had posted a picture of himself with Albie around the Mason-Dixon line. Albie had his paws in Greg's hands. Who is this guy who is bringing me this dog? He turned out to be the window into this much bigger world.

At first, Greg was wary of having a journalist ride along with him in the truck.

The truck is his home for half of every year; it's a private, self-contained world. It's him and one other driver. It's a little bit like being in a submarine with a small crew. When I first rode with him,

for an article I wrote for Parade magazine, he didn't know me from Adam. I had to earn his respect and his trust. For that article, I met Greg in Pennsylvania, spent the night with him in the trailer and did the drop-offs with him the next day. He had never allowed anyone to ride along before. For the book, I spent the summer of 2014 riding about 7,000 miles with Greg. He is the guy who gets these dogs to their "forever homes," but as he'd be the first to tell you, he's just one cog in a wheel of people who sacrifice enormously and endure a lot of heartache to rescue as many needy dogs as they can. This is a particularly acute problem in the Southern states, for a variety of reasons, social, cultural and political. For example, there isn't a strong culture of spaying and neutering in many parts of the South, and many dogs live their lives out of doors.



When I picked up the book, I thought it would be about the Katrina rescue dogs. But this problem did not start with Katrina. It's a cultural problem, and the people involved in these rescues are the only line of defense.

When people meet Albie and I tell them he's a rescue from Louisiana, they often ask if he is a Katrina dog. He's not old enough to be a Katrina dog; he's about 6, and Katrina was 10 years ago. If people are aware of the problem, they tend to associate it with the influx of dogs that came north immediately after Hurricane Katrina. But this problem preceded Katrina, and it's going to go on, unfortunately, for a long time, because there are no obvious, easy solutions. In the book, I relied on Southerners—veterinarians, volunteers, shelter directors—to tell me about how they see the situation. One young man from Louisiana who'd saved a litter of puppies said, "We love my dog, but she lives in the yard. If she gets hurt, she goes under the house until she's better." The idea that you'd have a dog in the kitchen while you're cooking a meal, or sleeping with you in bed, was foreign to him.

This is not universal—I don't want to paint this with one broad brush—but dogs in the South are seen by many people as property often obtained for a purpose: as hunting dogs, for example, or for protection. If they outlive their usefulness they are often discarded. Particularly in high-crime areas, you see dogs that live their entire lives chained to a stake in the yard.

But why do so many dogs come to the North, as opposed to being adopted in the South?

It's the sheer numbers. Some are adopted by local families, but to put it simply, the supply—the vast supply—is in the South and the demand is up North. There are no transports bringing rescue dogs from New England to Louisiana; that would be like bringing coals to Newcastle.



Where do all these dogs come from?

Some dogs are taken from puppy mills, dogfighting rings, hoarding situations. Many are picked up as strays and brought to public shelters. Albie was a stray. The overpopulation problem is enormous. In Houston, the consensus estimate of the number of dogs living on the streets is 1.2 million.

You write about “the forgotten dogs of Houston’s Fifth Ward,” and all around them “the forgotten people of America.” You saw these dogs under cars, chained up in yards, moving through openings in abandoned houses. What did you think when you first saw that?

It was otherworldly. I was there in the summer, and as the heat of the day subsides and it moves toward dusk, you can be walking down a street that two minutes ago was empty, turn around and see that you’re being trailed by 15 dogs. They seem to materialize out of thin air. The concentration of these dogs tends to be in very poor neighborhoods that are themselves neglected—streets filled with trash, high crime, gun violence. This is not a political book, but I did observe that only five miles away from the Fifth Ward are the headquarters of the world’s biggest and richest oil companies.

Into these situations come the people you follow. Greg, the truck driver, is the star, but these dogs wouldn't be rescued in the first place if it weren't for many people.

I spent a lot of time with the adoption coordinator who helped save Albie. She has raised four kids, and when I went to Louisiana they were about to take their first-ever family vacation. She has been devoted nonstop to saving as many dogs as she possibly can. She gets three to four hours of sleep a night. She goes out to find dogs who congregate around Dumpsters, and dogs that are thrown in the trash or leashed to the fence of the veterinary clinic where she works. She goes to public shelters. Folks like her are making Sophie's choice every day, and they are haunted by the dogs they can't save.

How many dogs are never saved?

In the shelter where Albie survived for four months, roughly 90 percent of the approximately 3,500 dogs that come in every year never make it out alive. And how many dogs never even make it to shelters? Nobody knows.

Do the rescuers have a sense that they're making progress?

They know they're not getting on top of the problem. They're on a hamster wheel, and they're just trying to save as many dogs as they can. The compassion of the people who do this work is off the charts. They're burning up marriages, burning through bank accounts, just to get the next dog to safety. They know they aren't changing the world, but for the dogs they save and the families that adopt them, their worlds are forever changed.

Let's talk about your trip with Greg. You're in the cab of the tractor-trailer, day in and day out, and sleeping in the back with the dogs. What was it like?

The truck has 80 kennels secured to the walls, with about 24 inches in between. At night I was in my sleeping bag wedged between these kennels. When I was riding with Greg, it was all hands on deck. I was expected to clean kennels, walk dogs, comfort nervous dogs. I rode with one dog—a Lab like Albie, named Sadie—from Louisiana to Connecticut. She had epilepsy and couldn't ride in the back for fear she'd have a seizure, so she rode with me in the cab, and it was my job to give her medication.

Will you describe the route?

Greg leaves his home in Ohio every other Monday. That night he tries to get past Bowling Green, Ky., and, if he can, even past Nashville. By the next day they're in Louisiana. Then he detours into Texas and back through Louisiana, skirting north of Lake Pontchartrain and up through Mississippi. The drop-offs begin Saturday mornings in New Jersey. He's back in Ohio on Sunday. The weather can be unpredictable, but he lives by the Postal Service motto: "Neither rain nor snow...." I asked him about heating the trailer in the winter, but he said that with 80 dogs, if it's zero degrees outside it's about 72 inside, just from the heat of the dogs.

What was it like to deliver the dogs to families?

At the last stop, just before hopping out of the truck, Greg turned to me and said that a few days earlier these dogs were unwanted castaways, and now the doors are going to open and the sunlight is going to pour in. "This is heaven," he said. I think it's his heaven too, not just for the dogs. It's a joyous scene.

Immediately after being handed over, the dogs are posing in family pictures, literally smiling.

They do seem to be. Some of them hop off and they're unguided missiles—they're just so

excited to be off the truck. But so many seem to know they are home at last. Working on this book, I saw some grim stuff. It's inherently dispiriting to see dogs behind bars waiting for somebody to take them in. At the other end of the road are the happy endings, but for every happy ending there are God-knows-how-many dogs who never get this second chance.



Why do you think you relented and got Albie?

My youngest son was going into his senior year in high school. I wasn't ready to be an empty-nester. I wasn't ready to be done nurturing. Unlike kids, who grow up to be self-reliant, hopefully, dogs are dependent on you for the rest of their lives. They are vulnerable, and every day they look at you the way you wish your kids would look at you when they're 14 and rolling their eyes at your every utterance. Your heart just explodes for these dogs.

You were an anthropology major, and in our 25th- reunion book, you wrote that after law school you became a delivery boy for a liquor store and then did “two brief stints at prestigious but boring law firms” where your “main achievement was to bill fewer hours than every other lawyer in the firm.”

Yes, I had a very distinguished legal career. It turned out not to be for me. But I don't regret having gone to law school. I never had a career plan. I was shot out of Amherst like a pinball, and I've been careening around ever since.

You've written other books. Among them are *The Unofficial Mad Men Cookbook* and *Around the World on Two Wheels*. How did those come to be?

My wife, Judy Gelman, is a cookbook author. We did a cookbook together based on the food of Mad Men. It turned into culinary anthropology, an in-depth look at food culture in the Mad Men era.

The other book started when I got a letter from a stranger in the early 1990s. He was researching the story of the first woman to ride a bicycle around the world. His research had led him to believe that my mother was a descendent of this person. I set out to uncover this piece of family history: My great-grandfather's sister waved goodbye to her husband and three children

in Boston—the kids were all under the age of 6—to take a 15-month jaunt around the world by bicycle. This was in the 1890s. And she was every bit as outlandish as she sounds.



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Photos by Dana Smith