

Fostering dogs in Carlisle, where even “failure” is success

by Melissa Weiksnar

When walking “my” dogs and stopping to chat with fellow walkers, I often find myself explaining how one of them is a foster, and the other a “foster failure.” While most are familiar with the concept of a rescue dog, many are unfamiliar with fostering, so I wanted to share what I’ve learned about this process with Mosquito readers.

When I was considering adopting my very first dog in 2005, I knew I didn’t have the time, energy or experience for a puppy, so I was looking at older dogs on the Labs4rescue.com (L4R) site. Seven-year-old River, a 65-pound “southern gentleman” of a black lab, sounded like a great fit: he totally ignored cats, and was used to being alone during the day. Soon I was exchanging emails with his foster mother in Memphis, Anne, who explained that River had been picked up as a stray, lived with a family for two years, then was surrendered when they moved to an apartment that did not accept dogs. Labs4Rescue placed him with Anne until a “forever home” could be found. Anne came to know him better and was thus able to best match him with our family. When River finally arrived in Carlisle, he was EXACTLY as described.

Why we need foster homes

Not all dogs are so fortunate. In many parts of the south, spaying and neutering is not as valued as it is in most places in the north, so “surplus” pets can end up in shelters, many of which cannot hold animals more than a few days before euthanasia. But across the country, dogs are given up for a variety of reasons—Petfinder.com lists over 171,000 of them. Sometimes people don’t think through the responsibilities of pet ownership, and surrender (or abandon) animals because they are moving, changed their minds, or “don’t have the time” to train and exercise their pets. And even among those who acquired an animal with the best intentions, the weak economy has led to heartbreaking accounts of people who can no longer afford to keep their animals or who have lost their homes to foreclosure and cannot move with their pets. Sometimes illness or allergies of a human or animal results in the pet being relinquished.

Rescue organizations, both general and breed-specific, are able to accept some owner-surrenders, and sometimes volunteers go into shelters to identify dogs who seems particularly adoptable. Boarding rescued dogs is expensive and the kennel environment is not ideal. So a network of foster volunteers has developed so a dog has a chance to live with a family while it awaits adoption. One foster mother I spoke with had 40 dogs on her farm, of which 22 were scheduled to be transported north that weekend.

To become a foster family, the application process is as rigorous as if you were adopting, including a written



Melissa Weiksnar, left, introduces her foster dog, Blake, to his new owner, Donna Piche of Montreal.
(Photo by Jane Hamilton)

questionnaire, interview, home visit, and reference check. L4R updates their foster listing weekly. Someone looking to foster can scan the list to see what animal would be a good fit: is it better as an only dog? Is it good with children, men and women? Does it have special needs? How does it interact with cats? How old is it? What is its energy level?

It typically takes me several inquiries before I am matched with a foster dog. Sometimes it is already in the process of being adopted, or another foster family has been selected. Occasionally upon further exploration we discover a more subtle issue with the fit.

Bringing the foster dogs home

It’s always exciting to meet the foster dog. Our first, Sadie, awaited us at a “meet the pets” event in Connecticut. I picked up our second foster, Puppy, directly from the family who was surrendering her due to a military deployment. I collected our previous and current fosters (Willow and Blake, respectively) from Forever Friends pet rescue in Medfield. Massachusetts recently enacted regulations stipulating that dogs coming from a non-adjacent state have to be quarantined for 48 hours, and Forever Friends provides that service.

potential adopters, and let them come and meet the dog to see if it is a good fit. I’ve heard many people say, “but I couldn’t give up the foster dog, I’d become too attached.” That has not always been the case for us. Sadie, even losing twelve pounds before being adopted, was really too large for us. Willow had just a little too much energy for our empty-nest household, but proved to be the perfect fit for a family with a teenager who loves to hike. Indeed, staying in touch with the adoptive family is a great affirmation. And while we’ve never met, Anne and I have remained close friends for seven years: she is Blake’s foster coordinator, and is always “on the lookout” for dogs that would be a good fit for our household.

Some organizations do not allow you to adopt the dog you foster, because your job as a foster is to prepare a dog to be adopted. (One such organization, New England All Retriever Rescue, now allows you to adopt a foster if it is at least seven years old or has special needs.) Most breeds have rescue organizations and need foster homes, and some local organizations have foster programs. Several of my former students have also fostered dogs, and I’ve recommended fostering to friends who are interested in another dog, but often travel so do not want the full-time commitment of pet ownership. The foster period is typically a few weeks, but can be longer or shorter. Fostering can be a great experience for a family, with everyone helping an animal who otherwise might not have a chance.

When potential adopters started inquiring about Puppy, my stomach knotted up. I had a dream that she was being taken to another foster home, and awoke devastated. We had not taken her in planning to adopt, but River was already in his final decline. Puppy was a bright spot for him and for us. After I talked to a potential adopter who sounded wonderful, my husband and I looked at each other and said, “we can’t let her go.” We had fallen in love with her and applied to adopt her; she is now what’s known as a “foster failure.”

Blake’s new mom drove down from Quebec this past Monday to adopt him. It was really hard to say “à bientôt” but we know he has been placed in a fabulous, forever home. I’ve already spoken with Anne about our next foster dog, glad we can save another life and help make another family happy.

Anyone interested in fostering can check with their vet’s office, a local shelter or any of the breed-specific rescues found on the internet. As with any major decision, it’s best to “shop around” to find a program that’s the right fit for your household, and check references. FYI the next Open House at Forever Friends will be Monday, March 5, from 3 - 5 p.m. at 106 Adams St. in Medfield. Δ

As a foster family, you supply food and water, exercise, any trip to the vet, love and a safe environment. The rescue organization provides a crate (if needed), collar with tags, vet records and the support of both the foster coordinator and adoption coordination. They also supply heartworm tablets, flea and tick preventatives and cover pre-approved vet bills. Some dogs arrive very well trained, and others need to learn basic obedience. They all come spayed or neutered, but some need to gain or lose weight: Sadie came to us at 108 pounds, and my job was to help her drop eighteen of them.

You soon learn about the dog’s uniqueness, and keep the foster coordinator informed. For example, Sadie howled when I left to walk River. Willow was initially afraid to go downstairs in the basement. Puppy was very intuitive and calm with an increasingly frail River. Blake has a playful side and brought out that aspect of Puppy. While fosters are typically housebroken, each of ours had one or two “accidents” until we learned their routines and signals. And while we usually crate the dogs initially, once they prove trustworthy we do not.

Becoming too attached?

As a foster family, you will speak with