

Choices

Adoption: For Old Dogs, A New Leash on Life

By SUSAN LENNON
Special to The Washington Post

Hershey, a chocolate Labrador retriever, spent the first six years of his life outdoors, chained by a three-foot tether to a tipped-on-its-side washing machine. This was his "doghouse." Untrained, unsocialized and unloved, he almost became a statistic. Instead, he was saved by a rescue group and then adopted by Bonnie Anthony, a psychiatrist in Bethesda. A year later, he earned his first competitive obedience title, proving that you *can* teach an old dog new tricks. He's 13 now, still winning obedience competitions—and still bringing joy to his new family.

Hershey was lucky—and unusual. He could have become one of the millions of dogs euthanized at shelters every year. Most prospective dog owners want puppies or young dogs; dogs over the age of 4 are considered unadoptable by many humane organizations. Their chances of leaving a shelter alive are slim. But if more people knew about the unexpected joys these "secondhand" dogs bring, and how readily they adapt, bond and learn, more would choose an older dog over a puppy—and more of yesterday's puppies would still be alive today.

People involved with older dogs—rescuing, fostering, adopting—say that while preventing an unnecessary death is rewarding, it takes a back seat to the joys they experience with their oldsters. "While it's important to know that you're saving a dog's life,

in some instances, the dog is also saving yours. The human part of the equation gets so much more than the dog," explains Amy Shojai, national authority on pets and author of "Complete Care for Your Aging Dog" (New American Library, 2003).

Having rescued four dogs ranging in age from 7 to 15, Amy Heggie, of Bath, Maine, concurs. "It's true that you feel good about saving a life that would be harder to save than a puppy's, but it's not purely selfless. I get as much back from them as they get from me," says Heggie, who recently purchased her first puppy, but wouldn't hesitate to adopt an older dog again.

What is it about these pre-owned pooches that inspires such passion? Shojai feels that "the most impor-

tant thing is not the age of the dog; it's the connection you make." Shelters and rescue groups take pains to ensure that an adopter's needs mesh with a dog's traits. When a match is made, the bond is profound.

"It's hard to give concrete reasons why," Shojai says, her voice catching in her throat. "It's empathy, a connection you will recognize the instant you feel it." Mutually grateful, human and dog become partners—and it happens more quickly than with a puppy.

Heggie explains that a moment occurs when your adopted dog "suddenly realizes that she doesn't have to go anywhere else . . . she's 'home.' It clicks—she's safe with you and she knows it. Dogs who wind up in shelters have 'seen the other side,' and earning their trust, seeing that gratitude in their eyes, is incredibly rewarding."

These eyes provide a glimpse into the essential nature of the older dog. "All dogs have what you might call 'personality,' but older dogs have what I call 'soul,'" observes Teri Goodman, coordinator of the Senior Dogs Project in San Francisco. "While I appreciate personality, it's soul that I think makes the experience of living with an older dog so amazing and wonderful."

With testimonials like this, why would anyone give up their 8-year-old family pet? According to Jude Fine, founder of the Senior Canine Rescue Society, a Calgary, Alberta-based, federally registered Canadian charity, reasons include: "They want a new puppy, they redecorated and the dog doesn't match, the dog is 'old,' the kids

are gone, they just don't need the dog anymore."

Most of these dogs have spent their entire lives in the company of humans and are housebroken, trained and mature. Puppies and younger dogs require intensive work to reach this stage; only constant vigilance, obedience classes and the patience of a saint can turn an adorable bundle of squirming fur into a civilized canine companion. Even then, there are no guarantees.

"Every dog has issues," says Bonnie Anthony, but with a rescued older dog, "you know what they are up front. If he's a barker or a chewer, it's already apparent. It won't pop up two years down the road." You also know his adult size and energy level, a real asset for an older couple or family with young children. What's



BY MARIE POIRIER MARZI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Bonnie Anthony adopted Hershey, now 13, when the Lab was 6. Though older dogs may have behavioral issues, they are long past the challenges of puppyhood: chewing on furniture, jumping on people, housetraining.

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Humans generally outlive their canine companions; anyone who's loved a dog knows the heartbreak of losing a beloved friend. Why, then, would you deliberately bring home an older dog whose time with you could be so limited? Jane Harford of Laurel adopted Levi, a retired Maryland State Police bomb-sniffing Labrador retriever, in 1999. Despite the 13-year-old dog's death last month, Harford has no regrets. She even says that when she and her dog-loving friends start feeling sad about the prospect of their other senior dogs' departures, they just remember Levi—"he was so full of life. Despite our still-raw sadness, we chuckle at the memory of his learning agility at age 11-12."

Harford credits Levi with helping her to regain her equilibrium after a divorce. Actively involved in many aspects of dog care, Harford still has three other dogs—two are rescues; one was adopted at age 7. Would she adopt an older dog again? "In a heartbeat. In fact, I'm looking right now. Tell anyone who has any qualms about adopting an older dog that it's a great experience. Levi helped to save my life."

Many dogs live well into their teens. Adopt a 5-year-old dog and you may get to spend 10 years together. As Shojai says, "These are wonderful years . . . so much better than if you'd had a puppy who'd gotten sick and died young."

What about practical considerations—do older dogs rack up higher veterinary bills? As with humans, notes Shojai, "the first and last year of life tends to be the most costly. But it's less expensive to have a dog for five to eight years than for the entire 16 years of his life."

Johnny D. Hoskins, internist for older pets in Baton Rouge, La., explains that dogs are living longer and healthier lives than they used to, thanks to enhanced nutrition, preventive veterinary medicine and better overall care-taking. "Sure, most dogs will have more medical problems as they get older . . . but there is no guarantee that a puppy won't have health problems, either."

About 40 percent of the nation's dogs are over the age of 7. Adult dogs make great companions for people at any stage in life. "Adopted older dogs tend to attach to you more readily," says Anthony. "They're content with life and they have so much of value to offer."

Hershey, once tied outside to a washing machine, is a testament to that conclusion.

The following resources will help you learn more about the joys of bringing an older dog into your life:

- Adopt a Homeless Dog—www.petfinders.org.
- Labrador Retriever Rescue, Clinton, Md., www.lrrr.org.
- Senior Canine Rescue Society, www.seniordogrescue.org.
- Senior Dog Project, www.srdogs.com.



FAMILY PHOTO

For years Levi was a Maryland State Police bomb sniffer.