

The One that Got Away

Three tiny lumps of fur lay in a bed of green grass, waiting for someone to notice them. They are impatient; they might not make it much longer. Finally, they hear voices.

“How could anyone leave puppies like this,” Paula Schoen thought as she woefully gazed upon the horrid scene.

The three beagle puppies were disfigured. The brown and white puppy was covered in maggots. Another had lost the padding in its paws and had a massive scar from someone closing a door on its paw. All three were dancing on the line death from malnourishment and dehydration. They had been out in the humidity for so long the veterinarian didn’t think they would survive more than 24 hours.

Schoen could not lose faith. She was all the puppies had. Her heart broke from the thought of anyone leaving tiny, helpless, living animals to fend for themselves, when they have nothing to fend with.

“What do I need to do to save them?” she anxiously asked the veterinarian.

Realistically, there was not much anyone can do for these pups. The veterinarian told Schoen that she could try to nurse them back to health, but the chance of them surviving was slim to none.

Schoen has a long history of voluntarily helping animals in need, specifically dogs. As time went on, her passion turned into her career. She started off with helping local dog shelters in Baton Rouge. She cleaned crates, walked dogs and offered them unconditional love. As time progressed, she started a non-profit foundation, Friends of the Animals (FOTA). It focuses solely on rescuing, saving and valuing the less-fortunate dogs of Baton Rouge.

FOTA was created in January 2010, to find dogs from shelters in Baton Rouge and bring them to the dog adoption house. At the dog adoption house they are groomed, loved and trained to fit the profile of what every dog-lover wants: a good, healthy dog. In order to accomplish this, FOTA completely vaccinates the dogs and brings them to the highest level of health possible. If a dog has worms, they deworm them.

“The key to FOTA being so successful is that we completely treat the dogs for any illness they have and we do it for free,” says Schoen, “most people see a dog in a shelter that they want but they find out that the dog has worms and the shelter won’t pay to fix it, which discourages them from adopting the dog.”

In 2013, FOTA was awarded the Pennington Family Grant, which allowed the organization to rent a house off of Highland Road. The grant has lasted three years. This year, Schoen and her team will be doing everything they can to raise money in order to keep the house.

Before Schoen had the money to rent the dog adoption house she purchased a trailer and vet clinic from donations the organization received. “We will always be in need of money,” she said, “if we don’t have donations then we can’t medically treat the dogs or have a place to house them.”

During the course of any year, FOTA easily spends around \$58,000 in medical vaccines and supplies alone just to keep the dogs healthy. Other expenses go to treats, food, cleaning supplies, accessories (leashes, collars and brushes), and to pay for a few part-time employees. Everyone else that works at FOTA is a volunteer.

In the adoption house the dogs are shown endless love and affection everyday by the staff and volunteers. The dogs are bathed regularly, walked and played with multiple times a day, and they also have nap-time (yes, they have nap-time).

On top of the extraordinary care these furry friends receive, each and every dog that FOTA houses has a “foster home.” The foster homes allow the foster to see how the dogs adapt to a home environment that may have other animals or children. It is a luxury for potential adopters to know almost exactly how the dog will fit in to their new home, before they even get there. Since Schoen founded FOTA in 2010, there have been roughly 24,000 successful adoptions. Every dog that the team brings to the adoption house finds a home. If a dog has been at the house for an extended time then the foster will permanently adopt the dog. These are called, “failed fosters,” though it is not a failure when an abandoned dog finds a loving home.

According to bissellpetfoundation.org, only 20-30% of dogs in shelters are adopted each year. Five out of 10 dogs in shelters are terminated because there is not enough room. Every year, 3-4 million cats and dogs are euthanized from shelters nationwide. Sadly, 5-7 million cats and dogs are admitted into shelters each year, giving the animals a 40% survival rate.

Dr. Emily Taylor, who owns Capitol Heights Vet Clinic off Goodwood Blvd, said that she never brings an abandoned animal to a shelter because she knows they are usually euthanized within weeks. Instead, she brings them home and claims them as her own after exhausting every possible means of trying to find an owner.

Whenever she has clients bring abandoned animals to her clinic she urges them not to take them to a shelter. Instead, she advises that they try to find the owner. If they cannot find the owner then she tells them to bring the animal back to her clinic and she will find it a loving home. “I just can’t let an animal be killed when I know that I can do something about it,” Dr. Taylor said, “I will adopt every animal that comes my way before taking it to a shelter.” This is nothing but true considering she has five adorable dogs and a furry feline at home.

Schoen shares the same passion.

Rufus, the beagle pup Schoen found almost dead in the grass, is now seven years old. He is permanent member of the Schoen family and is a joyful, playful dog. His recovery was a miracle.

“I really can’t imagine life without him,” she said, “he’s the greatest dog I’ve had. I knew when I saw him in the grass that day that somehow he was going to make it; and that he was going to come home with me.”

His two siblings also survived and have both found loving families.