



SPEAKING OF DOGS
Seminars, Outreach & Rescue

Home for the holidays

The golden-coloured collie/chow mix dog looked up from the cage floor and softly waved his tail in greeting. “He seems like a nice dog,” said the manager as she gently stroked him through the bars of his cage “we’re just not sure what his entire story is”.

I arrived that day to meet ‘Askal’ a dog who had evidently run into some trouble when he was temporarily being cared for by a family with a number of small children. As the story was told, their 3 year old had been running down the hall and tripped on the sleeping Askal falling on top of him. In a reactionary response, he had left a welt on her arm. Askal was promptly taken to the animal shelter where he was held for 10 days in procedural ‘quarantine’. After the isolation period was over, several attempts were made to contact the family to reunite them with Askal. However no one ever called back or came in for him. A registered letter was sent and the shelter manager then received a call from the family providing her with name and number of the ‘official, original’ owner – who was out of the country dealing with a death in his family. She was able to track down his next of kin - a daughter - whom she hoped could put her in touch with the owner about his dog. Sadly, several weeks went by and it seemed that all efforts to find Askal’s owner or a guardian led to a dead end. Desperate to help the unassuming, quiet dog who everyone had become quite smitten with, the manager decided to call a dog rescue to have Askal evaluated in the hopes of finding him a suitable forever home – one without small children.

I brought Askal out of the cage and took him into the manager’s office so we could spend some time together. Prancing along beside us, he was quite happy to get some time outside of his cage. In the office he sniffed about for a bit and then planted himself between my legs as I sat chatting with the manager. I did a few ‘assessment tests’ to which he had no objection to and in fact he seemed to welcome the contact and remained unfazed by handling and all of the various interaction exercises I imposed on him. The manager and I looked at each other, looked down at the dog who was now gazing up at us with soft brown eyes as if to say “Can I go with you now?”

What could I say other than “okay buddy, let's get out of here”. There was only one problem – his name made no sense, I didn’t even know if I was pronouncing it right so I told him he would have to live with “Pascal” – I mean at least that was a name!

Pascal and I headed for the daycare that our rescue partners with, where we were met by the staff who welcomed him in and fawned over his handsomeness. He seemed delighted by the newfound attention and took the opportunity to ham it up and take it all in – and why not? I

smiled fondly at his antics and gave the daycare staff his profile and background – thought to be about 5-6 years old, vaccinated, quarantined for the incident with the child and was at the shelter for several weeks while efforts were made to find his original owner. I told them I would be back for him the next day for his vetting appointment. I leaned down to say goodbye giving him a chin stroke before heading home and he looked at me with confused eyes as he tried to follow. I felt the familiar emotional swell when a connection has been made with a displaced dog and am unable to clearly communicate what is happening to them. “It’s okay, I’ll be back – you go and I’ll see you tomorrow”. Incredibly, he seemed to understand perfectly, turned and walked down the hall with the daycare girls.

When I went back to pick him up for his veterinary appointment the staff told me that he seemed to be adjusting to his new digs just fine. He stopped for a good morning back scratch from one the girls then we headed to the car. A thorough vet check found him to be in good shape. The technician said she’d call if there was anything of concern with his blood tests and off we went, to go back to the daycare facility. Pascal readily jumped into the crate in the back of my van and lay down. He was such an amiable guy, my heart went out to him as it does to each and every dog we take – but there was just something about Pascal’s past that kept me wondering.

Several weeks went by and Pascal had become accustomed to the daycare routine. I was trying to get him into one of our foster homes, but there were a few challenges. One; all the foster moms and dads already had a dog and, two; Pascal was proving to have little tolerance for some of the dogs, especially the overzealous, exuberant males. The report I received was that he could be a bit ‘scrappy’ at times and he often hung out with ‘the girls’ (both human and canine) in the lunch room rather than in play groups with the other dogs. My main concern was if he wasn’t fully enjoying the daycare, I had to find him a foster home where he would be happier. Just as I was lining up a new foster mom, an adoption application came in asking for Pascal! It was from a lady who had recently lost her collie mix to an age related illness and she was looking for a companion and friend to walk with. She lived alone and had a house with a fenced yard and was close to walking trails. It sounded splendid for Pascal and arrangements were made for a meet and greet that weekend. As I was unavailable, one of our volunteers met the woman at the daycare and brought Pascal out for a visit and a relaxing autumn walk. Things seemed to go well, although Pascal initially seemed distracted and ambivalent toward the woman but did warm to her in short order. Our volunteer said the woman seemed quite interested with him by the time the meet and greet was over – she was convinced that an adoption request would be pending. On Monday, I received a message from the lady thanking us for our time and saying although Pascal seemed like a fine dog she was not going to pursue adopting him. Disappointed with the news, I am a big believer that everything happens as it should and that goes as well for things that don’t happen.

Finding Pascal a suitable foster home was on the top of my list. On the Thursday before Thanksgiving, I arrived home to a surprising message on my answering machine. It was from one of the staff who worked at the animal shelter from where I had picked up Pascal. She said “if you still have Askal in your rescue program, can you please call me back right away”? I

thought how mystifying is that? I telephoned back and was told there had been a call about Askal from a man claiming to be his owner. Evidently, he arrived back in Canada and went to pick up his dog, only to find out he wasn't where he was supposed to be and had been told his dog had been taken to an animal shelter. She said the man was totally distraught, had proof of ownership and had traced his dog to them only to discover Askal had been transferred to a dog rescue. I said I would call him and try and sort things out.

The man, who we'll refer to as 'George', answered on the first ring and was clearly anxious. When I said who I was, he immediately launched into the story of what happened and asked if I had Askal. I said we did have Askal in our program, but would need him to go through the same hoops as an adopter to which he replied he would go through anything, including hoops of fire, to get his Askal back. As we were making arrangements to visit his home, he broke down and began weeping – he said could not believe what his friends had done with Askal without telling him. In fact, he said when he returned to Canada he called them to pick his Askal up, but they didn't respond. Not hearing back from them, he drove to their home only to find out what had happened. Devastated and angry he left their home in total frustration and disbelief.

The next night my husband and I drove to George's house to meet him. As soon as we arrived he was shaking our hands, hugging us and talking non-stop. He showed us pictures of Askal as a puppy, Askal on the beach in Florida, Askal sleeping on the couch and many other Askal photo opps. He told us when he had gotten Askal from South Carolina as a puppy he was infected with heartworm. He recounted having to take him to the vet and leave him there for several days for treatment. George then moved to Florida where he and Askal lived for a while where they enjoyed the sandy beaches and walking together along the ocean's edge. It was off to Montreal next where George and Askal lived happily and peacefully for many years until his recent move to the Toronto area. He reminisced, telling stories about when Askal would go to work with him, knew all his co-workers and would go to each one for a pet or a back scratch. Once he had said "good morning" to all the men, he would go and lie down on his bed. George said Askal had been around children for the last 10 years and had never had a problem with them although he understood that if a child had physically fallen on him while sleeping he might have been startled and reacted. I told George we thought Askal was only about 6 years old and he said everyone he met thought Askal was a younger dog and said it was because they were both young at heart. We talked for over an hour with George about Askal and as we were about to leave, I just had to know – "where ever did you come up with a name like Askal for him?" George broke into laughter and recalled the story. When Askal was a puppy in South Carolina, George was standing with him and a group of children had gathered to see the fuzzy golden puppy. As they stood talking, one small boy asked "Hey mister, what's your dog's name?" Before George could answer, another boy replied "Ask Al, he knows". Before George could say another word, all the kids were calling him Askal and the pint-sized pup responded with kisses and wiggles for all! Now the name made sense! We said our goodbyes and made arrangements for George and Askal to be reunited the next day. As we turned to wave, George stood in the doorway tears streaming down his face yet his eyes now held a noticeable sparkle.

George was waiting at the daycare when I arrived – and yes, I was on time! His face was beaming as he hugged me in greeting. I reminded him he had to read and sign important

papers before we could proceed with the reunion. I know just when you thought I had tortured this poor man enough - but one must always remain vigilant and efficient. The papers were now signed and I held the leash that would join the two hearts together again. I found Askal snoozing in his suite and called his name – this time without the ‘P’. He seemed happy to see me and danced about giving the addition kiss for good measure. “I have a surprise for you big guy, someone is here I think you might want to see” I told him, as I tried to find the ring of his collar through his soft fur and wriggling. As we walked down the hall, George stood at the other end and bellowed “SKELL! SKELL! BUDDY, IT’S ME, SKELL!” Askal stood motionless for a quarter of a second, his ears perked fully forward and his entire body began to tremble – and just like that he catapulted himself down the hall toward George! The two old friends were intertwined on the floor rolling around like young puppies! George was weeping and Askal was making a high pitched yipping that sounded like squeals of sheer, utter delight! It was an incredible sight and Pat, the daycare owner, and I both had tears spilling from our eyes. Once the pandemonium had died to a dull roar, I asked George if I might take a few photos. I came around the desk and sat cross-legged on the floor and snapped a few nice shots.

It was indeed a true Hallmark moment and one that will remain with me until I’m an old woman (but wait, I AM an old woman!)

As Askal and George were leaving I remained seated on the floor and wished George a wonderful Thanksgiving and reminded him to call me near Christmas so we could have a visit. He promised to keep in touch and walked toward the door, glowing. As they were heading out the door, Askal suddenly stopped in his tracks and pulled George back into the daycare. Bewildered, George followed.

Askal ran toward me, licked my face and then leapt with both legs in the air back to George. Pat and I could barely believe what had just happened – it was if Askal came back to say “thanks ever so much for finding my dad”. George just smiled knowingly and said – “He knows who his friends are”.

I’ve always believed that dogs are incredibly special creatures; hence my new mantra – “Never underestimate the powers of a dog!”

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