



SPEAKING OF DOGS

Seminars, Outreach & Rescue

Touched by an Angel

By Lorraine Houston

“Come and take a look at this dog, she’s so unique. She looks like a mini long-haired Rottweiler” said Catherine, our animal health technician. We named her “Dina” said the Animal Control Officer who was transferring the dog on behalf of a neighbouring shelter. I put my pen down and walked into the small front lobby of the New Jersey shelter where I worked at the time. She was indeed a unique and stunning dog. She had the head of a Rottweiler, the body of a Border Collie and a thick black coat much like that of a Chow Chow. We asked the officer from the other shelter what breed of dog they had logged her in as. The woman looked at the paperwork and read from the cage card: “Rottweiler mix, seized from SPCA investigation with State Police from drug bust; female not spayed, approx. 4 years old”. As Dina was being led to the kennel area, I thanked the woman for transporting the dog and assured her we’d take good care of her; she smiled and, in turn, thanked us for launching the shelter partner program (an outreach program our Board had approved which offered over-crowded shelters in the county the opportunity to transfer dogs to our shelter for adoption, when space permitted).

Dina acclimated well to our shelter and enjoyed her outings with the dog walkers. Our veterinarian spayed her, cleaned her teeth, checked her over and gave her the thumbs up for adoption. We wrote a profile on her from our assessments and observations, put her on our website and would now wait for an appropriate adoption application to be submitted. As the weeks went by, many dogs found loving homes and one of the staff remarked that she was surprised that Dina hadn’t been adopted. We speculated that perhaps the breed, her age, the deep rather intimidating bark she had, maybe her colour (a study done revealed black dogs in shelters take longer to be adopted) or a combination of several variables may be impeding her adoption.

As a routine practice, during the week when the shelter was quiet, we would make a point of bringing one of the ‘long timers’ into the office for social visits, a break from the kennels, lunch sharing and general R&R. As Dina continued to be overlooked in the “find me a forever home” department, she became a frequent flyer as an office visitor. After a bite of lunch and some chin scratches she would jump into the chair beside my desk and either take a catnap or just sit there looking about. I would talk to her while I worked; tell her how beautiful her hair looked that day, explain that our next fundraiser needed to be a good one to help offset our growing veterinary bills or complain to her about the pet over-population problems. She would look at me with her deep-set amber eyes as if she couldn’t agree more and appeared to hang on my every word – refreshing because no one else did. She was such an unassuming dog, well

behaved and attentive, it was surprising that it was taking longer than usual to find her that special someone.

Weeks turned into months and Dina had become part of the front office staff; she even had her own bed. We noticed that despite our best efforts at keeping her kennel time to a minimum, she had begun to compulsively lick her front paw. As well, her ears were requiring follow up rounds of medicated drops. I announced to the staff that Dina needed a foster home to get her out of the shelter. However, we didn't have a formal foster program, only a small handful of volunteers who did an awesome job of supporting the shelter in various ways. Back then we were not connected to each other via email, Facebook or Twitter; in fact we thought we were quite advanced with our Petfinder site. In any case, we asked our core volunteers, the dog walkers and the Board if anyone could foster Dina, without success. I thought I'd give Ian, my husband, a call and see what his thoughts were on fostering Dina. If we could at least get her ears and lick granuloma cleared up it would be a start. His thoughts were always the same; as long as a foster dog is fine with our 'crew' and it was a short term commitment his answer was – "do whatever you think needs to be done for the dog". I told the staff that I would be taking Dina home on my weekend days off and was greeted with cheers and yippee's, for Dina was 'leaving the building'.

I had one small problem – our shepherd mix was named Dana – far too close to Dina. I was tripping over my tongue already and I didn't even have Dina home yet. One of the girls yelled out "how about Nina, I think it means 'pretty eyes'" and it stuck – we all agreed it was perfect for our girl with the exquisite amber eyes.

Once home, she settled in beautifully. She was one of those 'like she's always been here' dogs - no feather ruffling with the other dogs, good with the cats, housetrained, easy going and eager to learn, enjoyed playing ball with the boys (a terrific goalie for backyard soccer) . She had what is often referred to as great 'eye contact', something she seemed to do naturally and, although I had been through many obedience classes with other dogs, I had to admit Nina's dutiful look was exactly what was aspired.

I reported to the shelter staff on her progress and we updated the website profile to reflect her incredible personality, family dog potential, her trainability and inclination for sports and/or obedience. We were quite sure this information would generate some adoption interest.

Several weeks into fostering Nina, Ian called me at work and dropped a bombshell. "What would you say if I told you there is a job waiting for me back in Toronto. Would you want to go home?" A thousand things raced through my head but my answer came without hesitation "Yes, I want to go home. When can we start packing?" When we originally moved from Toronto to New Jersey, we really thought we were there to stay however the chance to come home to family and friends with confirmed employment was a 'slam dunk'.

That night we told the boys we had the opportunity to go back to Toronto and were met with mixed reactions but less resistance than we were anticipating. They had made many new

friends, liked their schools and were on the local hockey team, so we understood their reluctance to want to move 'home'.

Once the boys were in bed, we talked non-stop about the move. One of the issues we needed to resolve was napping under the kitchen table. We had become very attached to her but asked ourselves - were we the best forever home for her? We were a busy family; would Nina get the attention, mental and physical stimulation she required and deserved? We wanted her to be the focal point, someone's "apple", not one of several. If I took her back to the shelter, would she continue to be overlooked or would her new profile put her on the adopted list to that 'pie in the sky' home we were striving for?

The next day I called the Board president to give my notice and told the staff that we were moving back home in about 8 weeks. They wanted to know if we would be taking Nina with us and a lengthy discussion followed. We decided to continue to showcase her as 'adoptable' and she could be seen by appointment. About a month later, a family called who had recently lost their dog to age-related illness and were looking to adopt an adult dog like Nina. They had two children ages 9 and 11 (sounded like fate) and mom was home during the day. They wanted an indoor dog who would be the only family pet and she would like to join the local obedience classes. This all sounded quite promising so we invited them to the shelter for a meet and greet.

When they arrived, I suggested we take Nina to the outdoor meet area to spend some one-on-one time. I brought her into the fenced area and, before I could even get the leash off, the daughter was running over to her and was about to throw her arms around her neck. Nina immediately backed up, gave a 'whoa' woof and I intervened, explaining a better way of approaching. While I spoke with the parents and answered their questions, I noticed the son pointing at her and shouting "sit, sit, SIT!" then he was reaching to take her collar and push her back end down. I intervened again and looked at the parents for back-up but they were talking to each other and appeared to be oblivious. The father then said "I thought you said this dog was obedient?" Stunned by such a question at a time when I was hoping he would understand things from a dog's perspective and also speak to his son about his interaction, I knew then and there this meet up was becoming a meltdown. Not giving up on the education component, I gave it my best college try to explain building relationships on positive communication and I demonstrated what might be a more appropriate approach. Now looking impressed, he asked if he could try and I passed him some treats. Nina looked at me trustingly as I handed her leash over to the father. Before I could do anything, he jerked the leash harshly and commanded "COME! SIT!" Nina responded by looking at the father, looking at me (my face in complete and utter disbelief) walking over and planting herself beside my leg. It was all I could do to keep a cool head. However, I said "that is not what I showed you, in fact it does not remotely resemble the technique demonstrated". He was visibly annoyed, handed me back the treats and told me dogs needed discipline and structure, not doggy treats.

I felt the situation was going to escalate so suggested we call it a day and thanked them for coming. Not ready to give up, he said he would like to proceed with adoption! Blindsided by

this revelation, I simply said “I think we all need to take a step back and really be sure this is the right decision for everyone involved”. I took the leash from his hands and began walking with Nina toward the gate to make it undeniably apparent that the meet and greet was over.

Back inside the shelter, I called Ian and left him a message, “Hi there, it’s me. Just thought you should know the meet and greet for Nina didn’t go the way we hoped and I really think we need to talk about adopting her”. Smiles spread across the faces of the staff who could not help but overhear the voice mail message. Ian called back a few minutes later asking what happened and all I could say was “I’ll explain later”. He was fine with that but wanted me to tell Nina that she would have to become a Leafs fan – no cheering for the NJ Devils! I glanced over at her as she sat in her chair, looking up with those trusting eyes. I told him “I don’t think she’ll have a problem with the Leafs”.

Happy to be homebound, we arrived back in Toronto and settled in without really skipping a beat. Once we were unpacked, had registered the boys in their new schools and done all the ‘must dos’ Nina and I enrolled in dog classes. She was like a sponge for learning new things and was always up for a challenge with ‘the eyes’. We went on to participate in agility, dabbled in flyball and became regulars at the local dog park where I met many neighbours - who, down the road, became instrumental in helping launch our rescue efforts. Nina nurtured countless foster dogs and helped them along life’s path. She had a special knack for comforting the shy often traumatized ones blossom and find confidence, with the youngsters she would engage and teach them ‘fair play’ and the small and seniors could often be found cuddled up back-to-back with Nina on her oversized bed. She always seemed to know just who needed what – and that knack extended to her human family. She was a front row cheerleader at the boys’ baseball games, a non-judgmental, sympathetic ear when any of us had a challenging day, a zealous participant at birthdays, graduations, Thanksgiving get-togethers or any occasion for that matter and loyal defender and guardian (as it happened once we had break-in in progress at 4 AM one morning and as the intruder peeked through the crack in the back door, she was met by Nina who had alerted the posse including myself. We watched as the trespasser flew through the gate and bolted down the street).

As the years slipped by, time saw our boys become men, the loss of several beloved family members and friends, the gain of newfound relationships and celebrated milestones. Through it all, Nina was the unwavering constant. Her steadfast calm, gentle nuzzles and wise, committed eyes were a continual source of comfort and strength. She had the ability to revitalize our energy when life threw a curve ball our way. Regrettably, we were unable to return the act when we were told by our veterinarian that Nina had an aggressive, malignant form of oral cancer. We had noticed the red broccoli-shaped growth while she was panting one hot August day. Once diagnosed, we were told that it would grow rapidly and he gave our cherished girl only 3-4 weeks.

On August 23, 2010 we said goodbye and Godspeed to one of the most remarkable and noble dogs we have ever known and been blessed to have as part of our lives. When we returned home, I hung her faded pink collar on a peg on a decorative board in our kitchen. It will signify

her life but need not be a reminder of her presence as she is with us in spirit eternally. She is a testament to how our dogs enrich and solidify our lives. While we grieve her physical absence we celebrate the life we shared and are reminded at the time of loss just how little time we actually have. Dogs are like angels who come to visit, don't stay long but change our lives profoundly and forever.

This article is dedicated to all of you who have been touched by an angel.

Nina Houston 1995 to August 23, 2010 – until we meet again

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