

Roo's Story: Learning What a Rescue Dog Really Needs

During COVID, when everyone was adding puppies and rescue dogs to their families, Jenny and her husband Mark decided it was finally their moment. They grew up with dogs, but Roo would be their first dog as adults. Her rescue videos from Mexico sold them: a scruffy, light-brown, 40-pound Mexi-mutt bouncing around the shelter yard, hopping like a kangaroo, full of humour and energy. They could already hear themselves calling, "Roo!"

They imagined cottage trips, lazy summer picnics, long park walks. They bought all the essentials, then eagerly awaited her arrival.

But the dog that stepped out of the transport vehicle in a gas station parking lot was not the Roo from the videos.

She trembled violently, trying to slip out of her harness. Her eyes were wide and terrified. The volunteer had to scoop her up and place her in their car because she tried to flee. Roo shook the whole way home, then darted under the kitchen table and refused to come out. She wouldn't eat. She wouldn't drink. She wouldn't look at them.

Panicked, they called the rescue who suggested they hand-feed her to build trust, and to leash her and escort her outside even if she resisted - so they tried exactly that.

It only made things worse.

The handfeeding forced Roo to approach hands when she wasn't comfortable, but hungry. The leash caused panic. By day four she was growling whenever the leash came out.

Stressed out because she wasn't getting exercise and, in the hopes of snapping her out of her state, they took her to a dog park—perhaps seeing other dogs would spark the joy they saw in the videos. And for a moment, it did. Roo came alive playing with other dogs. But when it was time to go, she ran for forty minutes around the park to avoid being leashed until a stranger managed to grab her.

That was when they realized they needed help and called me.

When I arrived, Roo peered at me from under the table, shaking and silent. It was clear she didn't trust people because her entire world had flipped so suddenly all by humans. One day she was running freely with familiar dogs; the next she was spayed, shipped to another country, and put into the homes of strangers during the most emotionally intense stage of canine adolescence.

Training wasn't the answer. Safety was.

We removed all pressure—no more handfeeding, no more forced outings, and no more approaching her with a leash. Instead, we created an environment where Roo could make choices and explore when she felt brave enough. Little piles of yummy food and snuffle

mats were placed close to the back door to enjoy when she wanted. Soft “Hi Roo” warnings before walking past while tossing her a treat helped to build predictability and safety. They stopped trying to coax her out and instead allowed her to simply *watch* and adjust.

Slowly, Roo began to leave her safe space. On day three she ventured into the living room for a brief sniff around and on day four she approached the doorway, but the threshold made her a little nervous. By day five she tentatively stepped into the yard on her own.

But this was taking quite a while, and we discussed various ideas to help move ahead. And that’s when we realized the key was hidden in her shelter videos all along.

In the videos from Mexico, Roo was happiest when she was with other dogs. Dogs were her safe place—her familiar language, her comfort, her social anchor. Humans were frightening, unpredictable, unknown. Perhaps not always, but definitely due to the transition to Canada.

So, we brought in Broodie, a calm, trustworthy “failed” service dog whose natural confidence and quiet friendliness make her a perfect helper dog. We let Broodie into the backyard first, then opened the door so Roo could see her. She trotted straight into the yard—*trotted!*—and tried to play with Broodie. Broodie gave her a couple of play bows and a quick chase but then was focused on learning about this new place – exactly what we wanted her to show Roo.

Over the next few sessions, Broodie and a couple of other helper dogs came for the sessions to help build confidence and skills. They provided stability, clarity, and emotional safety. Roo watched them closely: how they approached people, how they explored the yard, how they walked on leash without fear.

Once Roo felt safe in the presence of her dog “translators,” real trust with Jenny and Mark began to grow. Only then did training make sense—recall, hand targeting, simple cues—but it all came *after* safety and trust had been rebuilt – and watching her doggie friends do so without any fear.

After a month, Roo got a dog walker, and Jenny and Mark were also walking her themselves without another dog. They discovered she loved treasure hunting in the backyard and the flirt pole was a huge hit. It was so nice to see Roo interact with her humans without needing a dog to be there.

They briefly considered adopting a second dog as Roo’s permanent companion but ultimately didn’t need to. The helper dogs were a bridge—temporary guides who helped Roo understand that people could be safe, too.

The Moral of Roo’s Story

Training didn’t change Roo. Safety, choice, and connection did.

For dogs like Roo, trust doesn't grow from forcing them to face their fears. It grows from offering them what they know, what they understand, and what makes them feel safe so they can finally open their hearts to everything that comes next.



Andrea Dinan
CPDT-KA, FFCT, KAD, LFDM-T
Award-Winning Certified Dog Trainer

Note from Speaking of Dogs: When looking to adopt a dog, we encourage everyone to do their research and due diligence. Not all "rescues" are equal. Is the group you're working with transparent about the dog's medical state and behaviour; is the dog in a local foster home; can you meet the dog prior to signing an adoption agreement; is their priority a best possible match? If you do an online search for "what makes a dog rescue ethical" you'll find a comprehensive list of practices that should be adhered to. The story of Roo is one of "what you see is not always what you get". It is without doubt, a cautionary tale.