

Fostering

hi!

♥ MY
NAME IS

MAY

FAVORITE FOOD:
PEANUT
BUTTER

By Karen E. Lange

For weeks, the small cream and tan bull terrier mix waited in the shelter, her face obscured by a plastic cone.

☀ I nap in sunbeams

I CHASE
STICKS

&
SOMETIMES
GIVE THEM
BACK

I LOVE ♥
cuddling
ON
The
couch



Hope

MAY had come to the Washington Humane Society in early November after college students in a D.C. group house abandoned her. Being in a kennel made her anxious. She rubbed her ears raw, and they became infected. She chewed her tail. Excited by the presence of other dogs, she jumped so high she landed on a kennel fence, cutting her left rear leg seriously enough that she had to get stitches—which is why she got the cone. Staff at the shelter could see that she would make a great pet. But no one wants a dog with a cone.

May's chances of finding a new home anytime soon would have been slim, if not for Marissa Brock. Like many young foster volunteers, 22-year-old Brock is at an in-between stage of her life—she wants to adopt but feels she isn't settled enough. She can schedule short-term foster animals around her frequent work travels, though.

In late December, Brock took May to her D.C. apartment to ready the dog for adoption. The effect was immediate: Out of the shelter, May was a calmer, happier dog (though she was still chewing her tail—and her paws). She rubbed her ears less. She began to heal. The stitches came out. The cone came off. The ear infections started to clear. Within a week, potential adopters were looking at a (coneless) online photo of May, who had already mastered the elevator routine in Brock's building. During her walks around the neighborhood, May's puppy-like face, now unveiled for everyone to see, had kids clamoring to play with her.

A month before May landed at Washington Humane, Theresa Gorman and her fiancé, Risto Laboski, rented a condo in northwest D.C. that allowed dogs weighing less than 45 pounds. It was their first space big enough for the dog they had been hoping to adopt. They knew from shelter visits that it would be challenging to find a small



HERE ARE
MY MOM
AND DAD

INDOORS, I curl up with them under a blanket
OUTDOORS, I take them on runs

enough animal. Because they were first-time dog adopters, shelter staff steered them toward a dog in a foster home. After seeing 32-pound May's photo and description on Instagram, they acted quickly. By the end of May's 12th day in Brock's apartment, Gorman and Laboski adopted the dog. Taking her back to the condo, Laboski says he felt the elation and anxiety a new parent feels taking home a baby.

What made it possible to commit so rapidly, Gorman and Laboski say, was seeing May outside of a shelter and knowing they could turn to someone else who'd had her in their home for advice—someone who, like them, lived in a high-rise building and worked during the day.

On a recent Saturday morning, "Miss

May," already used to sleeping in her crate when Gorman and Laboski are at work, dozes in a strip of sunlight on the living room floor, as Laboski, sitting beside her, rubs her chest. It's been three weeks. He and Gorman have already noticed that May blushes in the pink, black-spotted patch of skin just above her nose. She's pretty much stopped rubbing her ears and chewing her tail and paws. Sometimes, as she sleeps in her dog bed at the foot of their bed, she will wake and start crying, as though she thinks she's been abandoned again. But then she'll sniff, realize they're still there and fall back to sleep. She knows how to sit, is house-trained and does not chew the furniture. She is learning her name and how to walk on a leash. She loves to cuddle.

“Here’s a dog that was in a shelter for months,” says Laboski. “And she’s as good as it gets.”

INCREASINGLY, formerly “unadoptable” animals are finding their way home the way May did: Fostering is a crucial link between shelters and adopters, a temporary stay that changes the odds in favor of homeless animals becoming beloved pets. And more and more, animal welfare groups are looking for “fosters”—people willing to take animals at their most needy, and then, just when these animals have grown old enough or healed or been trained, give them up. (Occasionally, volunteers don’t succeed at this last, difficult step and keep the animal; that is called a “failed foster”—some of the best fosters have had one or two of these and kept right on fostering.) Fosters are people who rush in to help animals others discard, the critical allies of shelters overwhelmed with animals.

At first it was rescue groups—most without any buildings—who developed foster networks, expanding the number of spaces available for animals many fold. Then, in the 2000s, urban shelters began foster programs of their own. Volunteers can foster for a day or a weekend or over a holiday to give animals breaks from shelters. And now the fostering concept is spreading to rural areas as well.

“It saves tons of lives, because we wouldn’t

have a place to put them otherwise,” says Sarah Barnett, an HSUS staffer who volunteers with a D.C.-area rescue called the Lost Dog & Cat Rescue Foundation. She started fostering in college and has continued even after adopting one of the dogs she was fostering. She admits that passing the animals she fostered on to adopters over the years was bittersweet, but says it was worth it. “Once you’ve found an animal a home, you’ve literally saved that animal’s life.”

Unlike many groups, Oldies But Goodies cocker spaniel rescue can rent kennel space at reduced rates where it operates in northern Virginia. However, it’s just a stopgap measure—the group can’t afford to rescue more than 10 to 15 dogs this way, says president Teresa Butler. Beyond that number, “there are dogs that we might otherwise save ... that are going to die” because they are older or sick and difficult to adopt out. That’s the difference a foster can make, Butler says, especially in the summer, when shelters fill with abandoned animals.

There are the motherless, unweaned kittens brought in every spring and summer, their survival dependent on nearly eight weeks of intensive, round-the-clock human care. There are the puppies who might easily get sick in kennels because their immune systems have not yet fully developed. The older dogs and adult cats unhappy and stressed by the shelter, with

Helping Hands

Kittens at a Louisiana SPCA event (opposite) drink formula in the weeks before they can be adopted. Picked up as a stray, Pistol (below) waits for a foster at the Cashiers-Highlands shelter in North Carolina.

behavioral problems. The sick animals and those recovering from surgery, who need individual care over months. There are the surplus animals in shelters struggling with overpopulation and euthanasia. And there are the animals rescued from disasters in urgent need of temporary homes until they can return to or find permanent ones.

After Superstorm Sandy struck the Northeast in 2012, animal welfare groups launched a network for reuniting pets who lost their homes in the disaster with their owners. Helped by The HSUS, St. Hubert’s Animal Welfare Center in New Jersey set up an online system to match foster volunteers with pet owners who needed temporary care for their animals because they were living in cars or motels. “Foster a Sandy Pet” was so informal that Heather Cammisa, president and CEO of St. Hubert’s, says she does not have a full count of the number of animals served. “We wanted to communicate, not control.” But 90 animals went through the homes of volunteers who chose to register and sign the model contract (doing this made them eligible to receive food and supplies).

Rescues of animals from puppy mills and hoarding situations also depend on foster networks. The HSUS turns to emergency placement partners, and most of these rely on foster volunteers. It’s crucial for the animals, who perhaps have never been on grass or carpet or heard a TV or a garage door opener, to get used to being in homes—or they’re unlikely to find permanent ones, says Kim Alboum, HSUS state director in North Carolina and director of the placement partner program. Because rescues often take place in rural areas where foster networks are weak or nonexistent, Alboum says she is working to expand fostering outside the cities and suburbs where it’s now popular.

“This is a way for people to get involved in the animal welfare movement,” says Alboum. “And they’re doing something really big.”

Will you foster me?

I'M
SWEET,
SHY *And*
FRIENDLY
With OTHER
DOGS

I'VE
NEVER
HAD A
HOME



Yum! I love "milk"!

This is my new "mom"

A modest group of individuals in a small town can make a huge difference, says David Stroud, executive director of the Cashiers-Highlands Humane Society in the mountains of western North Carolina. Thanks to generous donations, the shelter has the best transport truck in the region, but it lacks a foster network. When Stroud first arrived at the shelter in 2012, he says none of the staff knew what he was talking about when he used the word fostering. They found out.

Cashiers-Highlands picked up 35 dogs from a puppy mill rescue last October in Rutherford County. Around a dozen were distributed amongst every member of the staff. Now, Stroud is searching for at least 15 volunteers to be regular fosters. He has three or four. If he could get the full number, he figures he wouldn't have to turn away any animals from his shelter, which has a two- to three-week wait list.

SHELTERS COAST TO COAST are challenged by the arrival of spring and kitten season, when they must find surrogate mothers for the feline orphans brought to them week after week. In New Orleans, it begins in March with the arrival of boxes, laundry baskets and plastic storage containers carrying litters people discover in sheds and under bushes, says Allie Mayer, foster coordinator for the Louisiana SPCA. The season doesn't end until late December. Of the 837 animals the organization placed in foster homes last year, 450 were kittens. Sometimes they come with a mother perfectly suited to caring for them. But usually the mother is missing or feral.

Mayer places two to six kittens with each of the fosters in her circle of "bottle feeders," experienced volunteers who care for kittens during the intense first three to four weeks of their lives. It takes the type



WE'RE ALMOST READY TO GO HOME!



♥ MY
NAME IS

ELOISE

I CHIRP
AT BIRDS



sleep on top of
bookshelves

That
was me
before!



Hannah!

SHE'S MY MOM. ➔
I GIVE HER
FACE RUBS.



Purr-sonal Touch

Hannah Shaw, aka "Kitten Lady" (kittenlady.org), kept only two of the many young cats she's fostered in Washington, D.C. One is half-blind Eloise (left), who was returned by an adopter. In New Orleans (opposite), a dog named Belle, fostered by Louisiana SPCA volunteer Meg Allison, accepts a hug from an admirer before she was adopted.

of extreme commitment that parents with a human baby have—the ability to feed every two or three hours, waking up once or twice a night. And it takes fortitude, because kittens, even the best cared for ones, die—a mortality rate of 10 percent is common. Once the kittens have opened their eyes and are weaned, the bottle feeders often make space for more of the youngest kittens by handing the litter over to a larger pool of volunteers (see "Kitten Care 101," next spread).

In Washington, D.C., Hannah Shaw, aka "kitten lady," has turned bottle feeding into a lifestyle. Shaw, who fosters for the Washington Humane Society (her paid job is associate campaigns director at Alley Cat Allies), has raised more than 200 orphaned kittens since 2008. Once

she fostered three litters with a total of 13 kittens at once. "When they're little, it doesn't really matter if there's one or a whole bunch, you have to wake up. ... You're their mom." From the first week kittens arrive in her home, she posts their pictures on Instagram and invites people to meet them. "If you want to save lives, then you have to be able to say goodbye."

Shaw has kept only two former fosters—her first foster and partially blind Eloise, who was returned by her adopter. "I decided I was the one to care for her." The first time one of her fosters died, she cried for three days, wrote him poetry and read the verses over his grave. Now she's able to accept that she will lose one or two kittens a year. "You have to move forward and realize you're doing the best you can."

RACHEL BROWN, who fosters for Heritage Humane Society in Williamsburg, Virginia, has pictures of all the dogs who've temporarily been part of her family, nearly all of them American Staffordshire and bull terrier mixes like her own dog. There's Junior, Bennett, Moose, Thurston, Dakota, Chase, Carter, Tiger, Chico and Gotti. And Cotton, her first, whose crazy energy was finally put to use in a state police training program for narcotics detection (he was adopted by his police handler's brother). Brown shares the photos like images of old friends, saying she loved them all. "These are the dogs I have a soft spot for ... the dogs nobody [else] wants to deal with."

The most difficult to give up was Tiger, a 3-year-old goofy brindle bull terrier mix, who would cuddle with her own

5 Things to Know About Fostering

- 1 If you want to foster, the first step is easy: Just contact a local rescue or shelter. Most have a page on their website describing their programs.
- 2 For your first foster, you may want to ask for a less challenging animal. Talk to the organization about how long you are able to foster. You may be able to try out fostering by taking an animal home for a night, weekend or holiday.
- 3 Find out the organization's policy on veterinary care. Many shelters and rescues will pay for it if you use their veterinarians.
- 4 Ask to be connected to other foster volunteers who can guide you.
- 5 It's tax deductible! In 2011, the U.S. Tax Court ruled that foster providers can deduct the amounts they spend taking care of foster animals.



dog, Athena. After an emotional struggle, Brown gave him to a local adopter. "We really wanted to adopt him, but I couldn't—I couldn't do that and continue doing what I do," Brown says. "It's real hard to see him [now] and know that he's not mine. But I'm happy that he's happy."

Butler, who's fostered more than 300 dogs for Oldies But Goodies, often several at a time, got some good advice when she was just starting in 2001. Butler's daughter was 10 years old and her son was 12, and they were all having a hard time giving up an 8-year-old buff cocker spaniel named Buttons to an adopter. If they had kept the dog, it might have been the end of their attempt at fostering. Butler's mentor suggested that she throw a party. So the family celebrated. (It helped that her daughter had seen how happy the dog's family-to-be was during a visit to their home.) They still have a party every time they adopt out a dog.

"There's the dogs you're going to cry over," Butler says. "[But I know] if I hadn't made the sacrifice, this dog that I love so much wouldn't be alive."

Meg Allison, who works for the ASPCA and fosters for the Louisiana SPCA, focuses on marketing the animals who come to stay with her. She's developed a system that on average allows her to find an adopter in a week. Generally, Allison picks up her foster animal on a Thursday, dresses him in

an "Adopt Me" vest and heads to Magazine Street in New Orleans, where she gives out the dog's business card. Then she goes to meet a friend for a drink or meal, taking her foster. Sometimes, she's interrupted by a prospective adopter before she can even place her order.

The weekly happy hours and the trendy restaurant scene weren't quite what Pamela Martin of Austin, Texas, was looking for when she took up fostering five years ago. Martin, now close to retirement, had just gotten divorced from her husband of 29 years. She realized she would need something to do while her still-married friends spent time with their families.

Martin heard about the foster program at Austin Pets Alive. Its members, now more than 1,000, want to ensure that no homeless dogs or cats are euthanized in the city. Drawing on her experience in occupational therapy, Martin soon began volunteering as a medical foster. She removed the table and chairs from her dining room and turned it into a foster room, placing dog crates and puppy playpens on the tile floor. Weekdays, she goes to her job, then stops by home during lunch so she can look after the one or two foster animals she always has. She also fits in walks for her three pet dogs, a 7-year-old dachshund, a 3-year-old pit bull mix and a 2-year-old Lab mix. The pit bull and Lab mixes are "foster failures," but Martin has succeeded around 130 times.

"It's so good to see them get well and want to play and be dogs again," Martin says. "There is no reason for them to be put down, if it's something they can overcome, if they can live the rest of their life with a family."

On a recent weekday evening, Martin had just gotten home with Hufflepuff, her latest foster, a puppy who's finished the treatment for parvo and tested negative. "[She] is the darlinest little fluff ball you've ever seen!" Martin says, as the 1.5-pound dog, who is still anemic, yips and yaps. "She's going to perk up here pretty fast!"

Within a month, the little dog has been adopted, making room for a 1-year-old Chihuahua with an upper respiratory infection. It could be distemper, but Martin is optimistic. "She's already up and about, barking at my dogs and coming up to me with tail wags and puppy kisses."

It is a different life for Martin than her former one, but a good life: rich and rewarding. Full of camaraderie. And needs that can be met, if only someone will step forward. There is a constant welcome. A constant embrace. A constant joy. A constant acceptance. And a constant letting go.

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↑ ON MY WAY
TO A FAMILY!

Wait! There's more!

1 WEEK TO 4 WEEKS

Fostering the youngest kittens means keeping a careful eye on the time. They will wake every two to three hours and need to be fed. Fosters are called “bottle feeders,” but they can use a syringe or other means to deliver the “milk”—warmed formula. Immediately afterward, the foster will need to gently rub the kittens beneath

their tails with a warm, wet cotton ball to stimulate them to go to the bathroom—something their mother would do by

licking. With practice,

feeding and stimulating each kitten takes about two minutes. In between,



the kittens fall back to sleep in a big ball. A warm water bottle will help them stay comfortable.



4 WEEKS TO 8 WEEKS

When kittens are ready to wean, with teeth coming in and growing appetites, they should be offered warmed formula mixed with canned kitten food. They only need to eat every four to six hours, depending on age, and they don't need to be stimulated to go to the bathroom. They can be left alone in a small, warm room. But they still require a lot of attention—and cleaning. Kittens transitioning to solid

When kittens are ready to wean, with teeth



food at five to six weeks are messy eaters. They plunge their heads and feet into bowls. Fosters must carefully wipe off their faces and paws with a warm washcloth and may even have to give them a warm bath (Dawn dish soap is optional), drying them thoroughly afterward because they are still too young to regulate their body temperature. At this age, kittens learn a lot from each other. If a littermate is too rough—scratching or biting—the offended kitten will cry and run away. It's a feline timeout.

AFTER 8 WEEKS

When kittens reach a weight of 2 pounds, they are ready to be vaccinated, spayed or neutered—and adopted.