

Sunday Column – Not All Rainbows and Unicorns For publication 1.8.17

You may not be able to choose your relatives but you do get to choose your next pet, and you're sure not going to choose one that is going to make trouble for you, at least not if you can help it.

At PAWS Humane we work intensively with our animals from the moment of intake. We do a thorough interview with owners surrendering their pets and this information goes into our database. Everything we are told is communicated to potential adopters in an effort to make the best possible match.

After intake our behaviorist, Karlene Turkington, assesses our various dogs and creates training programs that are carried out by staff and volunteers who have attended, and passed, her day-long dog training program. Training notes are maintained on each dog and these are shared with potential adopters.

Volunteers walk dogs or take them out for the day. Staff and volunteers set up playgroups for dogs. We also have volunteers who come in specifically to spend time with our cats. Any out-of-the ordinary behavior, both good and bad, is noted.

Unfortunately, some animals display behaviors once they go home, that we were previously unaware of. Alternatively, adopters may consider a certain behavior acceptable on paper but once they have to live with it they find they cannot keep the pet.

PAWS Humane adopts over 1,700 animals each year and the vast majority do fine. We make multiple follow-up calls at specific intervals to ask how things are going and we offer assistance whenever we can. Most adopters are able and willing to work out routine issues that arise as a new pet acclimates to their household. We will even pay for follow up consultations with our behaviorist.

But humane work is not all rainbows and unicorns and sometimes we find ourselves with a dog or cat that just can't seem to make it in a new home. This is heartbreaking for everyone but I can attest to the fact that the staff of PAWS Humane are committed to doing whatever it takes to prepare a pet for a successful adoption. They don't just give it lip service, they get into the trenches with our animals and help them gain confidence if they are fearful or learn manners if they are overly energetic.

Our longest term dog, Fritos, is a brindle retriever/Labrador/shepherd. At least that is the identity we claim for her. Shelters are pressed to identify dogs by breed so we give it a try, but we are frequently wrong. Whatever she is, she is gorgeous and attracts the attention of our visitors.

Staff members love Fritos, who has been with us nearly 300 days. She is a bundle of energy, intelligence, and love. She is very particular about her canine friends so we have to take care to find just the right fit for her play groups so she can burn off some of her immense energy.

She is also a very fussy girl and you have to be careful about just where you touch her. We have had her examined and x-rayed to determine if her reaction is caused by an injury or dysplasia. So far we have found nothing and are now working with the premise that she is simply sensitive to touch. Karlene has created a desensitization program in which several PAWS staff members are participating. We have faith that Fritos will be an amazing dog for the right adopter and we will invest the time to help her realize her potential.

Nobody's perfect, right? Most of us learn to live with each other's idiosyncrasies. This is as true for our family members as it is for our pets. The rewards of living with an intelligent and energetic pet are great if you're willing to take the time for her.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.