

Sunday Column – No Longer a Ghost For publication 4.23.17

One morning, just about a year ago, a volunteer from a local rescue group was carrying a litter of puppies out of Columbus Animal Care and Control (CACC). The crate fell apart during transfer to a waiting van and the puppies scampered every which way.

All but one of the puppies was easily apprehended and presumably went on to be adopted into loving homes. One puppy scampered into the woods, eluding capture for many months. In fact, he was on his own for nearly a year and grew into an adult dog while on the lam.

PAWS and CACC reside on a large wooded plot between the nearly 200 acres comprising Cooper Creek Park and at least as much undeveloped acreage owned by a neighbor on the other side. Deer, possum, raccoon, and coyote roam this land unhindered. It was a recipe for feral freedom, nice for a cat but lonely for a dog who, by nature is designed for a more communal existence.

This crafty pup managed to survive (probably with the help of more people than we will ever know feeding him) and eventually became a fixture around the PAWs campus. Visitors would report sightings and we would have to reply that, “yes, we know and we are attempting to bring him in if we can only catch him.”

His habit of appearing one minute and departing in an instant earned our boy the name, Ghost. The PAWS staff began to dedicate themselves to appealing to the need all dogs have for companionship. Ghost would come out any time staff or volunteers were walking PAWS dogs and he would even attempt to engage our dogs in play.

Staff members would sit outside on their breaks and try to entice him to eat treats out of their hands. Slowly, Ghost came closer and closer and began to linger in the company of dogs and humans. One Saturday in December, PAWS and CACC employees worked together to get Ghost into one of our play yards. But as they placed a lead around his neck to bring him into the shelter, the unthinkable happened.

Ghost had what appeared to be a cardiac arrest and he died on the spot. You may wonder why I would write such a sad and pointless story. Well, I wouldn't. Ghost is now very much alive because of a second year vet student standing nearby who immediately dropped to her knees and began CPR.

Ghost managed to come out of it and moved into a PAWS kennel where we have implemented what will likely be a year-long behavioral program aimed at teaching him that it is okay to accept the love offered by humans.

What I've come to call Ghost's "inner circle" is made up of PAWS Humane staff members who take turns each day spending 30 – 60 minutes with him. They open his kennel so he can walk

around, relieve himself, and simply be in the presence of people who ask absolutely nothing of him.

These dedicated staff members spend the time answering email or performing other tasks they can perform with pen and paper or a tablet. They intermittently hold out their hands with treats that he can take when he likes. At the end of the day, when it is quiet in the shelter, staff members bring a “helper” dog to play with Ghost outside the back door. It is easy to see that he loves these moments to be others of his kind.

We are in the process of completing a special enclosure to provide Ghost an opportunity to spend more time outdoors with both his dog and human friends. It includes a large covered area and a dog house will soon be added. Every week Ghost becomes more comfortable with a life among people. We post videos of his play time on Facebook and he has become a something of a celebrity in Muscogee County. No longer a “ghost”, he will have his pick of homes.

It is truly the sign of a new day in animal welfare that we can spend this time and energy on one dog. When animal control intakes have been cut to less than half of what they were just a few short years ago, we are completely redefining “treatable” when it comes to animal health and behavior.

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.