

## The Chance of a Lifetime: a Volunteer's Story

*'It all depends what you have learned in that time'.*

That was the response that I received to my first attempt to adopt a German Shepherd. I had just expressed that wish and had said that I had owned German Shepherds all my life. In my ignorance then, I had thought that I knew enough to be considered an 'experienced owner'. I had bought my dogs as puppies and reared and cared for them until they died. I had been a devoted and successful owner and my dogs, in multiples, had been commented upon favourably as beautiful, well trained and a pleasure to see and know. What else was there to it? I only applied for a rescue as I had begun to feel uneasy about buying a puppy, when there were dogs in kennels, waiting for homes.

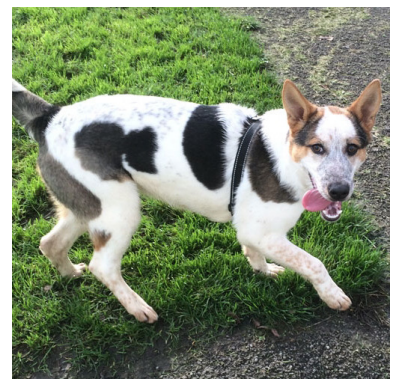


I had no idea what was to unfold for me. I could not have envisioned the learning curve that I was to experience, the challenges, the heartbreak and the blessings: above all, the blessings.



I knew that there was animal cruelty in this country and that it was even worse abroad. But I had tried not to know too much about the details. I paid my dues to the RSPCA: what else was there to do? I argued that there was no point in going into the detail of the suffering, if I were unable to do anything practical about it. I still feel like that. The horror of graphic pictures of the torture of helpless animals does nothing to raise my consciousness: it simply haunts me. I cannot cope with visual images. I am possessed by them and have flashbacks that invade me against my will and affect my life and happiness. I could easily become clinically depressed by this. So, I never imagined that I could do 'rescue work'. But I do. No, I have not emerged, phoenix-like, from snivelling wimpishness. I am still that person. I have merely discovered that there are many other ways to help the cause.

I was to learn that there are countless rescue centres throughout the country and that the best way to support homeless animals is to help these in their work. They re-home animals in a sustainable, responsible way. I knew nothing about that then. I knew nothing of screening interviews, home checks or of the myriad fundraising efforts needed to raise money to support this work and the ongoing lifetime support given to their animals. I had no idea of the scale of the challenge, nor of how learning of this would change my life entirely.





I could never be at the frontline. I could not and will never be that kind of person. Rescuers, even in the UK, can put themselves in danger rescuing dogs used for bait in the 'big business' of dog fighting. Those in Romania put their lives at risk every night. They have to wrest the dogs, whom they save, from thuggish bounty hunters who are paid to round up strays to be killed. They all then have the trauma of nursing these poor wrecked animals. They have them treated for their injuries and illnesses and when nursed back to health, if abroad, organize vaccinations and the paperwork that enables them to be shipped to other countries. There are whole networks of these devoted brave souls who cooperate in this venture to bring these poor terrified dogs from the streets of hell to comfortable homes here in the UK. And the vast majority of these workers are volunteers who, in German Shepherd Dog Rescue (GSDR), do not even claim expenses.

All members of my pack have been through this system and one has come to me, through GSDR, from Romania. I am still in wonder at the chain of hundreds of volunteers who work in concert to achieve this herculean effort! My Romanian boy had been rescued and physically tended, by the time he came to me, but was still inwardly broken. His life had been to live in his own filth, starved and beaten, chained to a wall. He will bear the physical scars for the rest of his life. The psychological ones are easing and his personality develops daily, as he relaxes and believes that this



comfortable loving home is his new destiny. He had to learn about everything, even how to walk in straight lines as he had never been able to do that before. His love, apart from food, is his soft beds that cushion his poor old joints. He came from a cold concrete hell to a normal life for a dog here in the UK. For him this is heaven.

I have other dogs, who lived on the streets in England, and still sometimes in forgetful moments, dig holes for themselves under a bush in the garden. My little bitch did not even know how to eat from a bowl, when she came to me at first. She had to 'capture' her food and I had to pretend to drop it by accident for her to pounce upon it. It became clear immediately that she had been 'hounded' on the streets by packs of male dogs. At first, whenever, she saw dogs coming into the same room as her, she screamed hysterically in terror. Now she allows the boy from Romania to share her crate, her only sanctuary in her early days with me.



As I write, I have my pack of rescues, contentedly trying to be as close to me as my small office allows. There are five, four of whom have come from the streets, through dog pounds into rescues. Four of them are German Shepherds, as they are the breed that I love. I have lost my original rescued girl but there are always others. When she died

after many years, I rang GSDR, who already knew me, to make a preliminary enquiry about another bitch. I was told that there was an urgent re-homing needed before the end of the month. I was not yet ready. 'Oh, I don't know about that, I'll have to think about it, oh yes, all right then,' was the inevitable reply. When that lovely girl died, I drove to the kennels, the very next day, still crying, to adopt my present girl. That is my life now.

I would never have thought that I could do this. I had no specialist knowledge and I was typically sentimental. My dogs are my life. I love them but there are always others in need. They cannot replace a lost dog ever but, as an adopter, I have the joy of knowing that I can play my part in rebuilding lives. It is a satisfaction like no other. I thrill to know that my pack feels safe and at home and that they know, not only my love, but that of each other as well, equally if not more important to them. I did not know when I began that a pack can unite to kill a new dog at first, but within weeks, die for that very same dog. They do move on: the aim of dog rescue is all about change and growth and happiness.

It is a joy to be able to capitalize upon the efforts of the brave and selfless souls who do the actual work of rescue. But there is more. I work now as part of a team. I help GSDR



with administrative tasks. I do initial screening interviews with prospective adopters and visit them to do home checks. We always need more people to help us with these jobs. To do the latter you do not need vast experience of German Shepherd dogs, only to be a person of common sense and good will. You would only be called upon, every once in a while, and this is a vital job in the process of achieving a successful adoption. All training and support is given. Then last, but certainly not least, we need donations and fundraisers. I am useless at the latter but some people are geniuses at this. And this is such vital work. Without money nothing can happen. And there is the joy of knowing that in German Shepherd Dog Rescue every pound earned goes to the dogs. There is no CEO, in this organization, earning a six figure salary. Everyone is a volunteer who donates not only their time, but even their expenses!

Please think what you can do to help our lovely dogs, who find themselves in such dire need. Like me, you don't need to be brave or tough or anything superhuman. Like me, you can play a part and that is the thing. We all work together for the shepherds whom we love.

If you are able to help in any way, then please contact us.



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