THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE A Home

Sherri Franklin pairs aging dogs with senior citizens—and everybody ends up with a new best friend.

by Meredith Maran

Fifty-four-year-old Sherri Franklin scans a group of senior citizens in a Berkeley, California, retirement home. Tucked under her arm is a white miniature poodle wearing a jacket that says, “Adopt Me.” Her gaze falls on an 83-year-old named George. She kneels beside his wheelchair and asks, “Would you like to hold Cappy the poodle? He’s 14—about your age, in dog years. He’d be so happy to sit in
your lap.” After George nods Sherri places the tiny animal in his arms. Cappy drapes himself over George’s body, sighs contentedly and closes his eyes. As if he’s been doing it for years, George strokes Cappy’s white curls with his age-spotted hand.

Rising to her feet, Sherri lets the new friends get better acquainted. She loves introducing senior dogs to senior citizens and orchestrates the mutually beneficial meetings several times a month. But her real work—finding permanent homes for unwanted animals—is a never-ending project. None of the residents here today will end up adopting a dog, so she will bring her pack to another retirement community tomorrow. And the day after that.

Sherri is founder and director of Muttville, a San Francisco-based nonprofit group devoted to rescuing elderly dogs—usually 7 or older—that would otherwise be euthanized. Since its founding in 2006, Muttville has placed more than 600 senior dogs, many with elderly humans, some of whom live in retirement homes.

Over the past few years Sherri has worked to build the network that makes this possible. Local animal shelters know to contact her when they have an old or abandoned dog, and her volunteers—vets, groomers, trainers and even doggie massage therapists and acupuncturists—treat the animal. Once the pooch is good to go, he’s placed in a temporary foster home to await permanent adoption. Sherri posts the dog’s photo and vital statistics, and sometimes a video, on the Muttville website (muttville.org), then notifies area senior citizen organizations and retirement communities.

***

Growing up with two brothers and a sister in Orange County, California, Sherri was not allowed to have a pet of her own. Instead, she played with and walked neighborhood dogs and devoured books such as The Call of the...
Sherri Franklin founded Muttville in 2006 but was involved in local animal rescue work for many years before that.

Years later, as a 39-year-old hair-stylist, she still yearned for canine companionship. But with limited time and money, it didn’t make sense for her to get her own dog. So she started walking dogs at the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). “I was haunted by the older animals who remained in the shelter,” she says. “They were abandoned for all sorts of reasons—they were sickly, unable to jog with their owners anymore, or simply had become too costly—and I knew they would eventually be euthanized.” She started bringing them home with her and trying to find owners among her clients and co-workers at the salon.

In 2001, in recognition of her dog walking and training services for the SPCA and her activism on behalf of dogs, Sherri was appointed to a seat on San Francisco’s Commission of Animal Control and Welfare, and was made vice chair a year later. She coauthored a bill in 2005 allowing Animal Control to issue fines to and confiscate dogs from owners who failed to treat their animals humanely (dog owners must change their pets’ water at least once a day and provide nutritious food and an adequate doghouse, and cannot leave them tethered for long periods of time). In its first week the law resulted in 15 citations and the confiscation of three neglected dogs; to date more than 100 tickets have been issued.

The same year Sherri was appointed to the commission, her 65-year-old dad, Ralph Franklin, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease and cancer. He lived more than 400 miles away, in southern California, so Sherry could check on him only by phone. “His illness was making
him depressed and withdrawn,” she says. “I was worried about him all the time.”

One day an old stray cat showed up on her father’s patio. Although he’d never liked animals, he let Zeppy into his house—and then into his heart. “My dad had never been a very warm or communicative guy,” Sherri says. But after Zeppy arrived, she and her father started having long phone conversations. “I knew the cat was in his arms,” she says. “I literally could hear Zeppy snapping at flies.”

As her dad grew more ill, Sherri remembers Zeppy crawling into his bed every night and sleeping next to him, almost as if the cat were Ralph’s protector. “When Zeppy passed away in his sleep, my dad was devastated,” she says. “Two weeks later my dad put down the book he was reading and died the same way.”

That’s how Sherri got inspired to bring the gift of animal comfort to other senior citizens. “It makes sense to match elderly dogs with elderly humans; both can be overlooked and forgotten,” she says. “And studies show that people with dogs are healthier—not only emotionally but also physically.” In addition to providing companionship, pets require care, attention and routines that can boost a person’s mood. And a recent study by Queen’s University in Ireland found that dog owners have lower blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as fewer injuries and serious illnesses.

In 2006 Sherri told her salon clients—and everyone else she knew—that she was officially launching a senior dog rescue program. People were eager to help. “They’d been listening to me talk about my vision for years while I cut their hair,” she remembers. One client who was an attorney offered to serve on Muttville’s board of directors; others donated cash. It didn’t take long to get the program up and running.

Today, Muttville’s staff is an all-volunteer crew of 100, 25 of whom serve as foster parents to Muttville dogs waiting for their “forever homes,” while the rest write grant proposals, produce flyers, walk dogs and conduct adoption outreach. Sherri’s house is Muttville headquarters, as well as a foster home to 15 dogs. And although she’s never married or had kids, she is surrounded by love. “The dogs are my children,” she says. “My bed is never empty!”

Along with photos and descriptions of available dogs, the website also offers resources, information and support to people who care for geriatric pups. By hosting events like “Moolah for Mutts,” Sherri raises nearly $150,000 a year for vet appointments, food, grooming and transportation for the dogs. About 80% of Muttville funding is provided by private donors and individuals who give through the website; 20% comes from foundation grants like those from the Grey Muzzle Organization and Petco.

Since California law states that shelters can keep unwanted dogs for only three days, Muttville gets more than 60 requests a week to rescue dogs that are facing euthanization. “It seriously hurts
“Studies show that people who have dogs are healthier, both emotionally and physically,” says Sherri. Owners even have lower cholesterol and blood pressure.

my heart to know that Muttville cannot take them all in,” says Sherri.

To ease her burden, Sherri focuses on the success stories that make it all worthwhile. One of them is Helenclare Cox, an 85-year-old resident of a San Rafael retirement community and the adoptive mother of Charlie, a long-haired Chi-huahua mix who is about 10 years old. “Charlie’s my little pal, my constant companion,” Helenclare says. “Wherever I am, he is.” When Helenclare’s husband of 35 years died in 2008, followed by their last surviving dog, she was extremely lonely. “I told everyone at my church that I was looking for another dog,” she says. “I wanted a friend.”

Like most seniors who adopt Muttville pets, Helenclare needed a dog she could easily care for: small, quiet, calm and housebroken. When a church member told her about Muttville, she called Sherri right away. After they’d talked a few times, Sherri said she had the perfect dog for Helenclare. Within a few hours Charlie was hers. “He makes sure we get our exercise,” Helenclare says. “We take two half-hour walks every day.” And since Helenclare’s address is printed on Charlie’s tags, he provides her with an extra element of safety. “If I fell down or needed help, people would know where I live,” she says.

Sherri retired from the Commission of Animal Control and Welfare last year, but she still works 30 hours a week at the salon—and dreams big. She wants to create a pet sanctuary in the Bay Area so she never has to turn away another dog. “Muttville gives me a greater purpose,” she says. “My dad found unconditional love and happiness at the end of his life by giving an animal happiness at the end of its life. I’m so grateful that I can carry out a mission in his memory—to try to find a loving home for every dog that needs one.”