



Shelter and Adoption

FOR THE LOVE OF A DOG

By Sally Stephens

The dogs on the euthanasia lists at California animal shelters are often abandoned, unwanted, and unloved. Pali Boucher, the founder of Rocket Dog Rescue, identifies with them. “I know that doomed feeling,” she says. “I’ve been the one that nobody would look at.”

Boucher spent decades living on the streets, homeless, addicted to drugs and alcohol. Her mother was an addict who dragged the girl from encampment to commune and back. When her mother went to jail, Boucher hung out with people she didn’t know.

Her mother died when she was ten. After living with her father for a year or so, she struck out on her own. While on the street, the young girl took care of pigeons, junkyard dogs, and feral cats that needed help. “Being able to take care of animals and heal whatever was wrong was the only feeling I ever had in my life that was a good, whole feeling,” she recalls.

Eventually Charlie, a hound mix, entered her life. But Boucher kept landing in jail for “stupid things, like trespassing,” and Charlie would end up at Animal Care and Control.

Boucher recalls the event that set her on her present course. “One time, when they brought Charlie in, she had bitten somebody, and they put her to sleep. It was the first time in my life I realized that I wasn’t just affecting myself by going out and being loaded, that I was directly responsible for the pain of somebody else.”

Boucher began to question her life on the streets. She volunteered at the SF/SPCA to spend time with the animals. There she met Leadbelly, a “loud, obnoxious hound dog, baying at the top of his lungs.” She was mesmerized

but hesitant. She didn’t want what happened to Charlie to happen to Leadbelly. She knew no one else would take him, though, and that meant he would be euthanized. So she adopted him and he became her companion on the streets. “Every second of every day I was trying to keep that dog safe,” Boucher remembers.

She worried about how her bad choices would impact on the dog. She worried about losing him, like she’d lost Charlie. There was a warrant out for her arrest because of missed court dates, so she arranged for a friend to take care of Leadbelly in case something happened to her. “I was devastated, because I felt like I would never see my dog again.”

Boucher was soon arrested and spent six months in a northern California jail. She was released late one night and got directly on a Greyhound Bus. Back in San Francisco, she could have gotten drunk or loaded, but she didn’t. Instead, she checked herself into a detox center. “My animal was my life and my joy. I couldn’t lose him because of old habits,” she says. Boucher eventually went through three detox programs, spending time with Leadbelly on weekends. Finally she was able to find a place where she and her dog could live.

Boucher often reflects on how Leadbelly changed her life. “At the time, I was just trying to take care of the dog, but I ended up taking care of myself. I’ve been sober for going on 12 years now, and that’s pretty rare, especially for someone with my history.” She says it has “never, ever” occurred to her to relapse because she owes it to Leadbelly – and his love for her – to stay straight.



PHOTO: © LORI CHUNG, WWW.THEPETPHOTOGRAPHER.COM

Pali Boucher and two canine friends on the beach in San Francisco

One day, she met a woman who told her about the field of animal rescue. “Two days later I had a foster dog in my house.” This was just the first of Boucher’s many foster dogs. Leadbelly helped with the new arrivals, playing the part of the kind, older dog.

While hanging out at local animal shelters, Boucher found herself drawn to the problem dogs, the ones no one else wanted. She thinks many dogs bite or otherwise fail temperament tests because they’re so freaked out to be in the shelter; away from it, they would be okay.

In 2001, after years of passionate work on behalf of unwanted dogs and other animals, Boucher decided she was ready to run her own organization and Rocket Dog Rescue came into being. “I wanted to save the dogs that the other rescue groups wouldn’t,” she says. Her group rescues dogs who are scheduled for euthanasia at shelters throughout California. She takes on as many as she can, finds them foster homes, treats their health problems, works on behavior issues, then locates permanent families for them.

Boucher is constantly on the lookout for people to foster dogs or to help pay the vet bills of rescued animals. “A guy flirts with me and I’m like, ‘Hi, wanna foster a dog?’” Pali laughs. “I’m oblivious to everything except the rescue work.”

Boucher dreams of finding warehouse space or a storefront in San Francisco to serve as a home base for Rocket Dog Rescue. She envisions a place where people can spend time with the dogs, see movies, have dinner – a vibrant community center for people and dogs.

She says she is amazed at the ability of dogs to love and trust despite everything that’s happened to them. She could also be talking about herself. The love of a dog rescued her when she had no one else. Now she has dedicated her life to returning the favor, rescuing dogs that wouldn’t survive without her.

Sally Stephens is the current chair of the San Francisco Dog Owners Group (www.sfdog.org), which advocates for responsible dog ownership and more off-leash areas in San Francisco Parks for dogs under their owners’ control.