

Aged to

Perfection

Rescues ramp-up senior animal adoptions.

By Meredith Wargo

Classic. Mature. Vintage. We use these words every day when describing the finer things in life, be it cars, cheeses or wines. But rarely are these words heard when extolling the virtues of senior animals. Too often, older pets are viewed as disposable due to medical challenges, changing family dynamics or simply because they're not as much fun as they once were. The sad truth is senior cats and dogs wait in shelters and grow older as they are passed over for their younger counterparts.

Thanks to the perseverance and passion of many rescue groups and sanctuaries, perceptions around adopting older animals are changing. As a result, homeless senior animals are getting a second chance at love and life while adopters are discovering the joy of caring for a senior pet.

Golden matchmaking

Aged to perfection. That's how Dawn Kemper, executive director and founder of Young at Heart Pet Rescue in Palatine, Ill., prefers to describe senior animals. "Older animals often have the exact traits that people are looking for," Kemper says. "They are quiet, calm, housebroken, good with kids and affectionate. But when a potential adopter finds out the animal is older, they lose interest."

The heart of Young at Heart's mission is to reduce the euthanasia rate for senior animals in Illinois by educating the public on the benefits of adopting older pets.

➔ **Proven pairs.** As champions of all golden-agers, Young at Heart created the "Heart to Heart Pets for Seniors" program, which aims to connect senior pets

with senior citizens. Young at Heart waives the adoption fees for any person age 65 or older who adopts a dog or cat



Despite a gray muzzle, many older dogs have as much energy and love to give as younger pets



BY TONIA KIM, COURTESY OF YOUNG AT HEART



love



Organizations like Young at Heart answer the need for foster homes and adopters for senior pets.



BY SHEILA HOOS, COURTESY OF YOUNG AT HEART

over the age of 10.

"We want seniors to adopt from us," Kemper says, "but we also want to be sure that nothing happens to our rescues if the owner can no longer care for the animal. We have a policy that pets can be returned to us no matter the reason, no matter the age. Part of our safety net with the Heart to Heart program requires a co-signer on the adoption application who will be responsible for ensuring the animal gets back to us, if necessary."

Since its founding in 2008, Young at Heart has re-homed more than 600 senior animals whose median age is 10 years old.

"When adopting out seniors, the name of the game is patience," Kemper says. "It may take a little more time and effort to get them to the point of being adoptable, but the perfect person for that animal is out there somewhere."

➔ **Sanctuary.** For animals with too many medical conditions or those that are too old to be adopted by the general public, Young at Heart created a sanctuary program as an alternative to euthanasia. Sanctuary families are permanent foster homes that ensure unadoptable senior pets receive a lifetime of care.

"We pay for all the expenses for the life of the animal for families who agree to love a senior pet until its last breath, as if it was their own," Kemper says. "While foster homes are the heart of our organization, sanctuary homes are foster homes with enormous hearts. The dogs and cats that enter our sanctuary program live out their days in a loving environment receiving the medical care and comfort they deserve."

Senior dogs rule

Muttville Senior Dog Rescue is all about the underdog, specifically dogs age 7 and older. (Most dogs enter their golden years between 7 and 10 years of age, with large and giant breeds becoming seniors earlier

PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMANDA MITCHELL



After adopting Frankie from Muttville, Amanda Mitchell caught the senior dog foster bug, caring for Rocky and Leo.

than small breeds.) Located in San Francisco, Muttville is dedicated to changing the way the world thinks about and treats older dogs.

"It can be as simple as helping people understand why a senior dog might be an ideal companion for them, depending on their lifestyle or activity level," says Marie Rochelle

Macaspac, marketing director of Muttville.

Recognizing that a home is the best environment for rescued dogs to receive love and comfort while waiting for adoption, Muttville founded its oper-

ation in 2007 on the foster-based principle. "Fosters help the dogs in so many ways but none as valuable as helping them to learn to trust humans again," Macaspac says.

Amanda Mitchell and her husband Geoff Taylor of Pittsburg, Calif., discovered Muttville when they were looking to adopt an adult dog after their beloved Beagle died. "In 2013, we adopted Frankie, an 8-year-old Dachshund cross mix," Mitchell says. "We soon realized that we couldn't stop with simply adopting Frankie. We also wanted to foster and offer something back to this organization that does so much good."

Muttville's fosterers are responsible for taking the dog entrusted to their care to adoption events throughout

AGE IS JUST A NUMBER

Unsure about adopting a senior animal? Here are eight benefits to consider:

- ➔ 1. Senior pets generally have had some training, both in obedience and house manners.
- ➔ 2. Senior pets are less destructive.
- ➔ 3. Older dogs have been socialized and know what it takes to be part of a pack.
- ➔ 4. Senior pets are grateful for a second chance.
- ➔ 5. Senior pets are great company for older or less active people.
- ➔ 6. Older cats will be less rambunctious than kittens, who are frequently active, curious and into everything.
- ➔ 7. Senior animals are a known commodity so you know what you're getting in terms of size, shape and personality.
- ➔ 8. Adopting an older pet makes a statement about compassion and the value of all life at all ages.

the Bay Area and to medical appointments. (Muttville pays for all medical costs while a dog is in foster care.) Muttville, which has placed more than 1,000 senior pets, also empowers the foster parent to be the dog's advocate during the adoption process.

"As a foster, if we feel that anything is wrong with the potential adopter or that the home environment is not optimal for the dog, we get the final voice in deciding if the adoption goes through," Mitchell says.

Since adopting Frankie, Mitchell and Taylor have fostered six dogs and successfully placed each one of them. Although it can be emotionally difficult to let a dog go after months of care, Mitchell acknowledges that the foster system works.

"Moving a dog into its forever home creates a space that can then be offered to the next dog in need of a safe haven," she says. "The real joy of fostering comes from knowing that you are making up for some of what these dogs have been through in their past."

The cat's pajamas

Ivan Smith's love and compassion for animals began at a young age. Ivan enjoyed spending time with his family's older cat, Butler, over the more rambunctious pets in the house. He also attended MSPCA-Angell's Summer Camp at Nevins Farm in Methuen, Mass., where staff members noticed Ivan's affinity to older cats as he devoted most of his time to their care and well-being. (MSPCA-Angell is a private, nonprofit organization that is the second-oldest humane society in the United States.)

When Ivan passed away when he was 13, his family created the Ivan Smith Adoption Challenge at the MSPCA-Angell to honor his legacy of loving cats, especially seniors.

Cats remain the most frequently surrendered animals to MSPCA's

Animal Care and Adoption Centers located in Boston, Centerville and Methuen, Mass. The Ivan Smith Adoption Challenge highlights the advantages of adopting a senior cat with a known personality, as opposed to a kitten who is still developing.

Since the inception of the Ivan Smith Adoption Challenge in 2011, MSPCA-Angell has adopted out more than 1,300 senior cats (9 years of age and older) by hosting several fee-waived adoption events. Donations made to the Ivan Smith Adoption Challenge subsidize the adoption fees, which enable potential adopters to commit more comfortably to the financial obligations of ongoing and future medical care of a senior feline.



STACEY NEWMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK

Older cats are ideal for people who want to know a pet's personality before adoption

Priceless at any age

Some adopters might express concern about the life span issue when adopting a senior pet, but the good news is that animals are living longer, higher-quality lives. But even with today's advances in veterinary medicine and improved nutrition, there's no way to determine how long our pets will live. What is known, though, is senior pets still have love to give and are grateful for a second chance. If you're lucky enough to be the one who gets to experience that ageless love, there are no words. *RM

Meredith Wargo is an award-winning freelance writer in Houston.

THE GREY MUZZLE ORGANIZATION



It's no secret that most animal welfare organizations struggle to make ends meet. For those groups dedicated to helping homeless senior dogs, the financial burden can be especially challenging due to ongoing medical expenses. The Grey Muzzle Organization is a unique resource that provides funding for senior dog programs nationwide.

"We are not a rescue group but a grantor," says Jennifer Kachnic, president of the Grey Muzzle Organization in Raleigh, N.C. "We don't have an endowment. All of our money is raised through public donations. We give out grants twice a year (June and December), which enables us to have a bigger impact in supporting the groups that help senior dogs."

The grants issued by the Grey Muzzle Organization fund a variety of programs, including basic medical care, hospice and foster care, seniors for seniors programs, senior therapy dog programs and community programs to keep dogs with their owners. Since its founding in 2008, the all-volunteer organization has granted \$425,000 to 60 nonprofit animal shelters, rescues and sanctuaries in 33 states.

The Grey Muzzle Organization also maintains a separate fund that supplies senior orthopedic beds and pads to shelters and rescue groups. Sleeping on a cement floor can be painful, especially for older dogs suffering from joint problems.

"If a dog has trouble getting up from a hard surface, he becomes less appealing to a potential adopter," Kachnic says. "We believe when seniors are comfortable, they show better." The bed fund has disbursed \$30,000 in orthopedic bed donations to more than 100 organizations across the country.

For more information about the Grey Muzzle Organization, visit www.greymuzzle.org