

Foster a Homeless Pet... Resolution #1 for 2010
By Lorraine May, M.A.

*To Foster: offer your home as a temporary solution for a homeless animal,
until he or she finds a forever home,
in collaboration with a rescue group or animal shelter.*

Jackson was 17 pounds of Chihuahua mix with an attitude. It soon became apparent that the attitude covered fear - of dogs and people. I gradually eased him into my home and gently loved him every chance I could. You could see the attitude slipping away each day, and in a couple of months he was ready for his forever home. And I was ready for another foster challenge! - Jenny

Teddy's foster home had fallen through and he was out of time at a local shelter. I had come to love this chow mix and desperately wanted to find him a home. Although I was involved in rescue, I had not yet fostered. I made the decision to give him the second chance he deserved. This dog, found as a disheveled stray, trusted me immediately – that taught me something. - Sue

Grey, a three month old puppy, had a rare heart condition. The vet couldn't guarantee his survival without major surgery. I slept with him in my arms every night to reassure him that he was safe, and to be there if he needed medical attention. It was difficult to let him go when he had recovered, but I knew he had a loving family waiting for him. - Lorraine

The difference between life and death

Each foster animal is an individual; each fostering experience is unique. The common ground is that a precious animal's life is saved while a devoted human being's life is enriched. With enough time, nearly all animals can find the right home. Having access to a foster home literally means the difference between life and death for far too many animals.

Just about any animal considered a pet or a companion to humans - from guinea pigs to horses - can be found in a shelter or rescue group, in need of a temporary place to stay until they find a forever home. Purebreds are given up right along with mixes. The reasons usually translate to incompatibility with finances, lifestyle, or expectations. That doesn't mean these animals aren't suitable for adoption; it means they need better matches.

If each of us could foster even once

Compassionate people are often moved to foster these abandoned animals to help them heal and bond again. Other motivations to foster can include wanting a fun-filled, adventurous or educational experience for the family. The unique opportunity to foster an already pregnant animal mom and her babies can provide the 'birth' experience that many parents want for their children. Then more pets could be spayed and neutered in one of our low cost clinics, instead of increasing the number of unwanted, euthanized animals in Colorado.

Fostering affords people the opportunity to discover if they are a match to adopt this particular pet, or well suited to have an animal in their lives at all. Rather than basing their choice on physical appearance, expected breed characteristics, or brief visits, an actual relationship with an animal can result in an informed decision and a lasting beneficial bond for all concerned.

What to expect

Successful foster homes are ones in which the needs of people and current pets are considered. Fully committed and fairly flexible households do well. Clear agreements between the rescue group and the foster home create the most favorable conditions. The ideal foster keeps the animal until adopted, but because this can vary from less than a week to several months, there is always a need for additional foster homes.

Generally, a rescue will require an application with references, followed by an orientation or training. Many rescues assume food, veterinary and emergency costs. Rescues value frequent informative contact regarding progress, as this helps to determine the best permanent placement and ensures an optimum experience for all.

The main duties of a foster are to keep the animal safe, to observe health and behavior, and to provide an environment that maintains their adoptability. Dogs residing in appropriately screened foster homes, for example, are likely to remain house trained, socialized and mannerly.

You may not be able to save the world, but to the animal you just saved, you are the world

Potential fosters often have reasonable concerns regarding their feelings, finances, and liabilities. They may question their abilities, or the impact of fostering on the family's routine. While fostering is not for everyone, you can do nothing more meaningful or valuable for an animal.

Please consider contacting a group today to find out if there is a program that might work for you. Rescue organizations can offer support and counseling in going through the decision making process. They are invested in a win-win-win relationship for the foster, the animal and the rescue.

Box 1

For more information:

Contact a Colorado shelter or rescue group through www.petfinder.com.

Box 2

Understanding Dogs, a different type of training class

Understanding Dogs is designed to teach dog owners, rescue volunteers and foster 'parents' how to prevent or change problem behavior. Each dog receives individual attention. For more information, go to www.mishamayfoundation.org, email mishamayfoundation@gmail.com or call 303-239-0382.

Lorraine May, M.A. is the Executive Director and founder of The Misha May Foundation, *mutts in safe homes always*, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization which rescues, rehabilitates and finds forever homes for dogs at risk.