

To the rescue: golden retrievers get a second chance

By Sarah Juon
Editor

A classified ad features purebred puppies for sale. Your children want a puppy. They fall in love with the adorable puppy and you buy it. As it grows, reality sinks in. Your family is gone during the day. No one wants to exercise or play with the dog, and you realize that buying the puppy was a big mistake.

This is the most common scenario, according to Stephanie Boismenu, a volunteer with Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin Inc. (GRROW), for how golden retrievers get surrendered into GRROW's rescue network.

Stephanie discovered GRROW in 2001 during an online quest to replace a beloved pet that had died. She and her husband, Nick, wanted an older, sweet-tempered golden retriever, "just like the dog we lost," she says.

The Boismenues are partial to golden retrievers for their outgoing, sunny nature. "They are the velcro dog," Stephanie says. "They're also intelligent, athletic and like being outdoors."

Stephanie saw that she could adopt an older dog through GRROW, and also that she could contribute to their mission by volunteering. "It was a new organization," she says. "I was its 30th volunteer." GRROW now has from 150 to 175 volunteers who do fostering, assessment work and fundraising. Most volunteers live in the southern part of the state. Stephanie is the only assessment and foster volunteer north of Wausau.

Like all canine rescue organizations, GRROW is responding to a need. Last year, the organization rescued 110 golden retrievers statewide. Not only do pet owners misjudge their family's capacity for caring for a dog, but owners are affected by circumstances—a new baby, a move, an illness or infirmity, sometimes a death—that require surrendering a dog.

And then, sadly, there are dogs that are simply abandoned, literally left out in the cold. "GRROW works with a network of animal shelters around the state," Stephanie explains. "A shelter will usually call us if they get in a golden retriever."

From surrender to adoption

When a dog owner contacts GRROW to surrender a dog, a volunteer is sent to assess the dog for its health and emotional condition. The 10-page assessment covers the dog's physical condition—weight, teeth, nails, skin, cleanliness—and its personality.

"I'll take along another dog, some food, food wrappers, rawhide bones, toys and a water bowl," Stephanie explains. "I'll test the dog for aggressiveness with each item by touching its back with a long, artificial hand. I'll persist, pushing a little.

"Most goldens are mellow and won't mind what I'm doing with the hand," she continues. "But if I see growling, snarling, tail stiffening or eyes darting, I'll report that to the GRROW board, so they can decide what to do. We don't take rescue dogs that have strong aggressive tendencies."

More than once, Stephanie says, the fake hand has saved her from getting injured.

Sometimes, a family will change its mind about surrendering their dog. "It can be that they don't know how to act around the dog," she says. "We'll try to educate them, point out that if the dog growls a lot, the kids should leave it alone while it's eating or by the water bowl. We aren't running a consulting business, but if we see they're on the fence, we'll give them tips in obedience training, and sometimes that's all they need to give the dog another try."

If a dog is accepted into rescue, the owner pays a modest surrendering fee that is used for GRROW's veterinary bills. The dog is then put in a foster home for up to two weeks—the length of time, Stephanie says, it takes for a dog's personality to



Star Journal photo by Sarah Juon--
AS A VOLUNTEER with Golden Retriever Rescue of Wisconsin Inc. (GRROW), Stephanie Boismenu has fostered more than 20 dogs. Her current crew includes Sadie, Happy, Sasha, Miss Belle and Tucker, who was a model for Foster and Smith.



Star Journal photo by Sarah Juon--
STEPHANIE BOISMENUE doesn't assess a strange dog without her "hand." "It's saved my life several times," she says. With her foster dog, gentle Sadie, however, the hand isn't necessary.

reveal itself.

Under foster care, the dog is taken to the vet for a check-up; its health issues are dealt with and, if necessary, it is neutered or spayed. And then it is ready to be adopted into a loving “forever” family.

In the past four years of her involvement with GRROW, Stephanie has fostered more than 20 dogs. “Most of the dogs, when they walk through that door, fit right in, like they’ve been with us forever,” she says. And, invariably, she has fallen in love with a number of them, and becomes an adoptive owner herself.

But because she can’t keep all the dogs she’d like to, one of her greatest pleasures is finding the right matches for her foster dogs. The matchmaking is an art, she says. “Nick and I will sit down and go through the applications, to find the perfect family. We like to go and visit them.”

Just like the lengthy intake process with surrendered dogs, prospective adoptive families also are evaluated. “We do an in-depth interview so we can make the best match,” Stephanie says. “We find out what their needs are—do they want an active dog? an older, mellower dog? We ask about finances, how they intend to exercise the dog, where they’ll keep it, what they’ll feed it. We’ll check the environment—are they near a busy street? Is the yard fenced in? We don’t release a dog to anyone who intends to keep it chained.”

When the right match is made, there is no one happier than Stephanie and Nick, and the new family. “We usually keep in touch,” she says. “They’ll send us gifts, and photos of their newest family member, they’re so grateful.”

The fostering life

Fostering goldens is an emotional roller-coaster, Stephanie admits. For instance, 12-year-old Sadie, her newest ward, came with several tumors that had to be removed. “She has a new growth on her mouth,” Stephanie says with a worried look while she cuddles Sadie. “I’m taking her back to the vet. I just don’t know if she’ll be adoptable.”

One of the most heart-wrenching experiences, she says, was picking up a golden that had been surrendered by a family moving to Florida. “It was this situation where an 8-year-old boy’s father had died and the mother had remarried. I picked up the dog, and the little boy stood there, just sobbing. He had known the dog all his life. I drove away, and just lost it. I had to pull over.”

Of the five goldens currently in the Boismenu house, four, for one reason or another, made the status shift from foster to adoptee.

Take Happy, for instance, a young, bouncy mahogany golden. “We fell in love with him the moment we saw him,” she remembers. “He came to us so filthy we had to hose him down outside three times before the water ran clear.”

Happy had been kept in a tiny, filthy 6x6-foot outdoor kennel, never allowed near his owners’ house, never exercised or let out, often going for a day or more without food or water. “When he came to us,” she says, “his name was Tubby. He was a wild, wild boy, but he was so happy to be with us, so Nick said we had to change his name. All he wanted was to be with a person.” The Boismenus had to start from scratch, housebreaking Happy. He didn’t even know how to climb stairs. And he still has his quirks, Stephanie says. “He’s always drinking gallons of water, probably because he didn’t get water for long periods.”

As he nuzzles Stephanie’s hand and fetches a tennis ball for her, his name clearly suits him.

GRROW is always looking for volunteers and prospective adoptive families, says Stephanie, as well as information about dogs that need to be surrendered. Anyone interested in learning more can visit their website at grow.org. The surrender hotline is (888) 655-4753.