



FLORIDA VETERINARY
BEHAVIOR SERVICE

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EVERYBODY NEEDS "A MURPHY"

By: Michele Gojkovich

YOU SAY YOU'RE A DOG LOVER? **ADOPT AN OLD DOG!**

I may know what you're thinking - "But it will die soon. It will break my heart." Yes, it will, on both counts. But the love you will experience outweighs the pain tenfold.

My husband, John, is a cop. In February, 2010, he was on patrol when he heard the call over the radio about an older Chihuahua walking alone on a side street in our city. We were the owners of 3 Chi's at the time, and John was on his way. He had already named the dog Murphy, because we found an older dog a few years before and decided to call him Murphy. We found that dog's owner, but from that point on, every time we saw an older dog we called it "a Murphy."



By the time he got there Animal Control (AC) had already picked up the dog. John went over to the car and peered in to see a very skinny and sickly looking dog on the front seat of the car. He asked the AC officer if he could keep the dog while they tried to locate the owner, but the paperwork involved in these things had already been started. Murphy was on his way to the Animal Control kennels and then to the Humane Society where they would try to locate an owner and, if none found, decide his fate. Judging by how old he looked and other obvious problems, we were sure he wouldn't last long without an owner.

I hadn't even seen him yet, but my maternal instincts took over. I was on the phone with the Humane Society daily, begging them to let us be the first in line to adopt him, and assuring them we would take care of him regardless of his health problems. In the meantime, my husband went to the shelter and filled out the paperwork. Questions like, "Where will the dog sleep?" and "What kind of food will he eat?" were answered with the sentence, "Wherever and whatever he wants." We got lucky. Nobody claimed him, and we got the call that he was ours.

The Humane Society personnel had taken very good care of him. Regardless of his age and physical condition they gave him the same excellent care and medical treatment they do for all of the animals they shelter. The only thing they couldn't do was neuter him, because he had what looked like a tumor in that area. He had other problems too. He was completely deaf and blind in one eye. When he walked, his back legs couldn't keep up with his front legs. As a result he looked like a newborn colt toddling with every step.

The only explanation I can give about how I felt when I first saw him is an overwhelming feeling of love and a fierce protectiveness for this dog I knew nothing about. He was black and white, grey from old age, and very skinny. He looked a little out of it, but he hadn't been sedated. In addition to his other problems we were told he might have brain damage. That seemed true, because we would learn that he always looked that way and would kid around that Murphy always looked like "he was a little high."

We took him to our vet, who confirmed his medical issues. She said he was "at least 10 years old," and her suggestion was for us to just "take him home and love him." So, that's what we did. We carried him out to our backyard so our other 3 dogs could get acquainted with him easier, and he acted as if he was at home from the beginning. He was obviously used to his disabilities and went about his business and interacting with the others with no problems at all. Our other dogs accepted him right away. Although they are normally competitive for attention, they seemed to naturally show him the respect his age and condition commanded.

We had some things to learn about having a disabled dog. We were used to taking our dogs into our fenced-in backyard and letting them do their thing. Murphy needed to be watched. We found this out quickly when he fell into the pool. My husband was standing right next to him but had turned his back for a moment and then heard the splash. Within seconds, John was pulling out a soaking wet Murphy, who acted like nothing happened, except he was soaking wet. We knew we would no longer have him outside without a watchful eye.

Our dogs all sleep in bed with us, and we expected Murphy to do the same, but he had other ideas. He would allow us to put him on the bed and hold him for awhile, but all of a sudden, he would jump up as if startled by something and try to run and jump off the bed. We had placed a body sized pillow with baby blankets in front of my closet along with bowls of food and water, and that became Murphy's favorite place to lie. He was also housebroken. Anyone who has Chihuahuas knows they are not easy to housebreak, but Murphy always let us know when he had to go. If we were sleeping, he would be sure to make it to the puppy pads.

Our life with Murphy had begun. He slept most of the time but was a joy to be around when awake. He was funny to watch. It was impossible not to smile at his colt-like walk and laugh at his "high" appearance. He could stand and sniff at the flower of a weed endlessly. He was in his own little world and seemed pleased to be there. We held him as long as he would let us before he'd get that startled feeling and need to be put down.

Our other dogs ate dry food, but Murphy needed the wet kind, so I had to feed him separately. I fed him in the bathroom so he could eat undisturbed, and he quickly learned the routine. Although there were times I'd swear he was on his last legs, he would *skip down the hall* after me for his bathroom mealtime. It was hysterical. He made everyone he met smile and fall in love with him. Some would say, "Oh, poor Murphy," but he didn't know there was anything to feel sorry for. He wasn't concerned about his disabilities - in his mind all was right with the world.

My friend Sylvia watched him when we traveled. She and her daughter loved him too and didn't mind his special needs. Sylvia has 2 dogs as well, and they would all chase each other around the living room furniture in circles. He was just a joy to watch and impossible not to laugh at. Sylvia's daughter would wrap him in one of his baby blankets and tell me that "Murphy is an angel." Sylvia kept asking me when we were going away again. She said her daughter asked her that all the time, and they couldn't wait to baby-sit.

During the spring John and I traveled to our second home in Tennessee. Sylvia had conflicting plans for one of our trips, and we had to take Murphy with us. We hadn't done so before because we thought it might be too much for him, but he traveled the 14-hour trip like a trooper. He was used to living in a flat state, and the slope of our backyard was a bit of a challenge, but he got used to it. Murphy had a great time toddling around the yard and getting familiar with all the new smells. It was also a little chillier than he's used to. I'm not sure if that's the reason, but it was during that trip that Murphy let John and I hold him with us in bed as long as we wanted without getting skittish. What a wonderful feeling to cuddle with him in bed and in front of the fire - it was just a joyful experience. Looking back, I know that letting us hold him like that was the beginning of his decline.

When we got home, he wasn't his old self. His appetite had diminished, and I was willing to do anything to get him to eat. We bought him hamburgers and cheeseburgers I could heat in the microwave, and anything else that would encourage a skip down the hall. The skips still happened, but a lot less often. He had days where he didn't eat at all. We had so many times that we thought we were losing him only to see him bounce back to himself the next day.

Not long after his first trip, we had to take another longer one. John's mother was being operated on, and we had no idea how long we would be away. Mom developed complications, and we were there for a month. During that time, Murphy got very sick. He lost the use of his legs completely. I had to carry him outside and position his legs so he could go to the bathroom. When we went to the hospital, I diapered him to keep him as clean as possible until we got home. I had to hold him to give him food and water, and he learned to eat from a fork. If this sounds like a lot of work - it wasn't. It was just an indescribable feeling of love, and we would go to any effort to make him as comfortable as possible. I knew that his body was shutting down, and I should have eased his misery, but I didn't want to do it in an unfamiliar state with a vet he had never seen before. He continued to decline when we got home, and making that call to the vet was very hard to do. I had to hear from her that it was time, even though I knew it anyway. He was already dying, and I couldn't let him suffer anymore. My husband and I were sobbing as we drove to the vet. I held him and kissed him, and told him over and over how much we loved him. I know he couldn't hear me, but I also know there is no way he couldn't feel how much he was loved. We both held him and felt our hearts break as he was given the shot to give him peace. When she told us he was gone, we were surprised. He had the same "high" look he always did. It gave us a smile and made a terrible moment a little more bearable. We knew we had given him the best life possible. Our vet said Murphy had "hit the lottery when we found him," but we were the lucky ones. We were so fortunate to have had him almost a year and a half. Nobody expected him to live that long.

Murphy never licked our hands or gave any outward reciprocation of the love we gave him. Still, we knew he loved us, it was just there. It was impossible not to feel the love that emanated from that little dog's being as we cuddled him or just carried him around. Yes, it was a short time, but I wouldn't trade the amount of time we had that dog in our lives for anything.

Of course it wasn't easy to lose him, but not adopting him would have been the biggest loss of all. He taught me so much. He taught me about strength and resilience in spite of physical deficiencies. He taught me that you don't need a dog to lick your face or come running to greet you to know how much he loves you. He taught me not to be selfish - to love a dog for his needs instead of my own. He taught me that we will definitely get another "Murphy."

There are so many "Murphys" in shelters who desperately need homes. They sit and watch the younger ones go to their forever homes while feeling more and more hopeless. Most don't

have the disabilities we had with Murphy - they're just old. Let one teach you not to be selfish. Let one love you and give you the kind of joy and fulfillment that Murphy gave us. I promise, there's no greater gift you can give for yourself or your "Murphy."

If you're considering adoption, ask to see the older dogs, and *PLEASE*, consider adopting a Murphy of your own. Please give them another chance for a forever home, and to share the tremendous amount of love they have to give. You won't regret it.