

TO THE *Found Dogs with a Mission* RESCUE



Elise Lufkin
Photographs by Diana Walker

By the author and photographer of *Found Dogs* and *Second Chances*

"*To The Rescue* is a transformative, heartwarming book that illustrates how dynamic the healing power of love is for all involved. Read it, open your heart, and see how you, too, can be a blessing to others."

—Allen M. Schoen, DVM, author of *Kindred Spirits: How the Remarkable Bond Between Humans and Animals Can Change the Way We Live*

"Elise Lufkin once again opens our eyes. What is more honorable than dogs who have been abandoned by humans, forgiving and returning to helping humans? Thankfully there is an author who reminds us to be more like our dogs."

—Bill Berloni, coauthor of *Broadway Tails: Heartfelt Stories of Rescued Dogs Who Become Showbiz Superstars*

"If the title alone doesn't get you, the images and stories will. Animal and human, bonded together through the hardest of circumstances. A must read, a must see, a must share."

—Jamie Lee Curtis



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RITA

— Robert Higa, Management consultant —

When the time was finally right for me to adopt a dog, I knew what I wanted: a friendly, medium-sized dog, a good companion animal that would enjoy lots of outdoor activities and also be content to nap while I pursued my law school studies. After months of looking at all the local shelters, I came across Rita, a mixture of border collie, English setter, and Australian shepherd. She had been hit by a car and was recovering from surgery to repair a badly broken leg. Her owners couldn't afford to pay the thousands of dollars in vet bills, so they'd abandoned her at the animal hospital. As I watched Rita with staff at the Pets in Need shelter, I saw her charm and her ability to connect with people. Soon she was nuzzling up to me, and I knew that she was the dog I had been searching for.

Rita still had at least a year of rehab ahead, including follow-up surgery to remove several pins that were holding her front leg together. She now has a permanent bone plate and three screws. She was not allowed to put much stress on her healing leg so our activities were limited to on-leash walks, some basic obedience training, and simple indoor fetch-and-retrieve games. Her focus, ability, and willingness to learn

were immediately evident. Once the leg was completely healed, we progressed from simple ball games to more complex activities, eventually competing at the top level in local canine Frisbee contests. Rita quickly mastered a couple of dozen commands while showing an ability to learn much more. Today she responds to over forty commands, many of which can be given either by voice or hand signals. She obeys even when the command is given by a complete stranger, or if a toddler tells her, "Sit!"

Rita's aptitude for Frisbee convinced me to have her try out for the Baseball Aquatic Retrieval Korps (BARK) team of water dogs sponsored by the San Francisco Giants and managed by Pets in Need. Dogs in BARK retrieve home run balls hit out of the stadium into the water at McCovey Cove. They work from boats, diving into the water on command, then they follow hand signals to locate and fetch the balls. After several months of training we made the team. Rita soon became team representative for media events and fund-raisers, promoting awareness of abandoned animals throughout the Bay Area. The publicity gained by the BARK team, especially during the Giants'



2002 World Series—season, contributed to record-setting fund-raising. Adoptions at Pets in Need more than doubled.

During our three years on the BARK team, I learned about pet therapy (animal-assisted activities [AAA] and animal-assisted therapy [AAT]) It seemed to me that Rita's wonderful temperament and her aptitude for doing tricks and entertaining people made her particularly well-suited for working with patients in hospitals. After a year of additional training we passed our first Delta Society evaluation in March of 2003. In 2005 we were accepted for PAWS, the pet-assisted wellness group at Stanford University Hospital and Clinics. With PAWS, we have paid regular visits to the medical/surgical unit, the physical and occupational therapy unit (PTOT), and the day hospital unit of the children's hospital

(the Lucille Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford).

The PTOT sessions are always full of activity as we work with the staff to assist patients in many types of physical rehabilitation. On one typical day, we worked with a young stroke victim on regaining motor skills and learning to use a signboard to communicate. At first the patient simply petted Rita, great for motor skills and a pleasure for both. Then the patient became a little more animated and unsteadily but successfully pointed out letters on the signboard: T-R-I-C-K-S.

I explained a few of Rita's tricks and corresponding hand signals. With very limited motor function and no verbal capacity, but armed with a tasty dog biscuit in one hand, the patient managed somewhat abbreviated hand signals. The ever-motivated Rita

connected with each one and responded flawlessly. I will never forget the look on that patient's face.

At the children's hospital day unit we visit with children receiving infusion therapy such as chemotherapy, blood work, and dialysis. Rita's tricks always bring smiles to the kids and provide relief and welcome diversion from their treatment. Some of the patients are Rita's "cuddle buddies," children who prefer cuddling and petting.

One day at the children's hospital we saw a little boy who was anxious to get to Rita. His mom put him down on the floor for a visit. He took a few steps holding her hand, then let go and continued walking the rest of the way to Rita. Once he reached us he started gently petting her on the head. I noticed that the mother was excited, waving at doctors, nurses, and therapy staff to watch as the boy stood steadily on his own, happily stroking the dog. I learned then that for months, ever since he had started treatments for an acute infection, the boy had not been strong enough or motivated enough to walk or stand on his own. I showed him how to balance a biscuit on Rita's nose and explained that she would wait for him to say "O.K." before tossing it up and catching it in her mouth. Rita got a large ration of biscuits that day.

It is tremendously satisfying to witness and participate—even in a small way—in a patient's recovery, but when our visits include patients who don't survive their illness, the magic of a happy, friendly dog can be especially meaningful. While I may get caught up in the emotion surrounding the plight of a sick child, Rita always seems capable of bringing out the best in any moment. Recently we visited lovely little three-year-old Ava who was tired and upset after a long day of tests and procedures. Ava immediately invited Rita to join her on the

bed and then called for a group hug with her mom, Rita, and me. At the end of our visit Ava thanked Rita with a gift of some precious fish artwork she had made herself. This was our final visit with Ava on one of the child's last remaining days. That day was made significantly brighter by the simple, heartfelt connection between a special kid and a special dog. An experience such as this confirms my belief that there is no better place for Rita and me.

Mary Delaney, charge nurse at the hospital, is one of Rita's fans. She says, "Rita distracts the children from the rigorous effects of chemotherapy and other invasive procedures. I see them smile and laugh as they watch her perform her amazing repertoire of tricks or settle down to snuggle with her. I see the anxiety on a parent's face disappear for a while when Rita and Robert enter a room."

In 2005, Rita and I assisted in the development and expansion of the visiting-animal program at Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF). I provided consultation and, with Rita, joined in as one of the founding therapy teams at ARF, where the Pet Hug Pack program today includes over eighty handler-animal teams visiting sixty-five facilities including schools, hospitals, adult day care, and rehab centers.

It has been a remarkable journey for both of us. As Rita relied on help and kindness from many human strangers, now she provides assistance and comfort to human patients. For me it has been an enriching and privileged experience to participate with Rita in these activities. Amid the stress, anxiety, and uncertainty of health crises, Rita and I are there for the sole purpose of providing pure and simple warmth and comfort in the form of four paws, a wet nose, and a wagging tail.

SOPHIE

— Don Conkling, Veterinarian —

Sophie spent the first three years of her life as a street dog in Mexico City. She was guarding three puppies, all dead, when she was picked up and taken to the Refugio San Franciscano. The Refugio, home for 1,700 dogs mostly running loose, and a number of cats, is run by a remarkable eighty-one-year-old woman, Ita Martinez de Escobar de Osomo. Ita started this sanctuary years ago. It's a tough place but filled with love. Ita can tell you the name and history of just about every animal there.

Soon after Sophie's arrival, Christi Payne from Compassion Without Borders came to talk to Ita about taking a few friendly, adoptable dogs to California where various rescue groups would find homes for them. Sophie, always interested in people, was hanging around when Christi came to choose the first group. Sophie and nine other dogs headed north. As a vet, I work with several of the rescue organizations, so Sophie came to the clinic with two other dogs that needed medical treatment.

I fell in love with Sophie immediately. Brenda, my wife, took just a few minutes longer. The little Mexican street dog came home with us that night, howling all the way. She was shy at first but she has a true terrier's

grit. She did well in obedience classes and then started agility training, but she would leave the course to go visit anyone on the sidelines who had ever given her a cookie. One of the trainers, who had therapy dogs herself, said, "I know something this dog would like to do." So six months and two days after she arrived in our lives, Sophie and I were certified as Delta Society Pet Partners. Since then I have become an evaluator for Delta as well.

Sophie comes to work with us at the veterinary hospital every day. Even though we work full time, we always manage between three and six visits each week. Hospice is our favorite. One patient who was paralyzed in all but one hand loved dogs so much, she would have her caregiver wheel her out to a nearby trail so she could visit with passing dogs. We were a novice team at that point, and it was very rewarding to see the peaceful expression on the woman's face as Sophie snuggled with her. At one visit, the patient was so uncomfortable she had not slept for several days, but as soon as Sophie settled down next to her, she fell asleep almost immediately, though even asleep, she kept stroking Sophie with one finger. An hour and a half went by, the woman slept, and Sophie



barely moved a muscle. When we left, she dragged me down to the trail, expressing herself quite plainly, “After all that, I’ve got to move!”

Another patient had trouble swallowing, which caused her to gag and make sounds that could be scary for a little dog but not stalwart Sophie. Whenever we visited, the patient wrapped herself around the dog and the two napped together for an hour or so. Then there is the patient with dementia who thinks that Sophie is her dog. Even when her memory is most clouded, she remembers Sophie’s name, although she doesn’t remember mine. And there is Dorothy who, at ninety-four, is very sharp, and one of our favorite people. Sophie is always happy to see Dorothy and would be happy to see her even without the pound cake. She jumps right up on the couch and proceeds to show off her reading skills. I hold out a flash card that says “Bang!” and she flops over on her side. She can read a number of words, but she’s sharpest on “Sit up,” “Shake,” and “Bang!” We have been visiting Dorothy for over a year, and we haven’t missed a single

week. When you meet someone you really click with, it seems as if you have known them forever. Dorothy often says, “Sophie is my best friend.”

We also visit the psychiatric unit at Stanford Hospital. This is an interesting population, so there is always something new. The young girls with anorexia are some of the saddest to see, and also some of Sophie’s favorites. They are there for a while, then they go home and a month or so later they are back, worse than before. One day we met a patient who felt compelled to cut himself. At first I was a little nervous about him, but he was a sad, gentle soul. He lay down on the floor, rested his head against Sophie, and petted her for a long time. Sometimes just being there with someone is Sophie’s most important job. We try to help the patients think of better things and work on appropriate ways to interact. To tell you the truth, I think the staff benefits as much from our visits as the patients do. Sophie is a comfort to everyone because she is so loving, yet she makes no demands, except occasionally, “Please go on petting me.”