

New shelter helps save life of Riley the Lab

Susan Flynn

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The final years of life looked bleak for Riley. In early August, the black Lab mix with a muzzle full of white was found tied outside a veterinary clinic, abandoned in the middle of the night for a reason no one knows.

The dog officer held him for the required 10 days, but no one came forward to claim him.

Riley was old, probably between 8 and 10 from the looks of his teeth. His mean-sounding bark could scare some people away. He had a slight limp. And no one knew much about his history.

Let's just say his odds were not good.

Then Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem agreed to take him in.

Plenty of older dogs develop chronic problems and rely on daily medicine to stay alive. They can be in pain. Sometimes putting to sleep an old dog that led a full life is a noble option.

But Riley was healthy.

"Why put the poor dog down just because someone didn't want him?" says Laurie McCannon, a director at the shelter who drove to Lowell to pick up Riley.

Taking in old dogs is something new for the Salem shelter. In May, they moved down the street on Highland Avenue to a space 10 times bigger. Before, they never had the room for old dogs that can take weeks — if not months — to adopt. Everyone wants the puppies.

Older dogs also get depressed alone in cramped quarters. They stop eating and get sick. Now, at the new location, they have cages as big as shower stalls.

They can save some of the older dogs other shelters may not be willing or able to take in.

Shortly after arriving, Riley would lumber into McCannon's office and sprawl out underneath her desk as she worked. He barked a lot and was "awful in the cage" when visitors stopped by, but she could see the dog was "a big mush."

Around this same time, Janet Campbell spotted a picture of Riley on the shelter's Web site. She liked to check out the dogs from her home in Somerville. Her old dog had died and her heart still ached, but she thought it was almost time to take in a new one.

So, nearly every day for six weeks, she went to her computer to check back on Riley. Other dogs would come and go, but Riley's sad-looking face stared out from the screen, waiting for the right person to bring him home.

Campbell started thinking it might be her.

"I didn't think he should have to spend his life in a cage just because he's old," she says.

On Sept. 12, she picked up the phone and called the shelter. She spent four hours with Riley and left feeling the fit was right for both of them. With an older dog, she thought, you know what you see is what you will get. There will be no surprises.

At Campbell's home, Riley is kind and calm. He likes to go for long walks. He never climbs up on furniture.

"He has the perfect temperament," she says.

He's happiest lying in the middle of the room with other people all around.

Riley will likely die in a few years. That's the hard part about adopting older dogs. But Campbell takes comfort knowing the end of his life will be spent in a home where he will be loved.

The older dogs, McCannon says, are especially loyal to their owners. It's as if they know they were saved.

"There is gratitude," she says.

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Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem will hold a Blessing of the Animals on Sunday, Oct. 5, from 1 to 3 p.m., at the new location at 347 Highland Ave. All faiths and animals are welcome.

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