

Rusty's Story

"Rusty and Me"



My relationship with Rusty, who I hadn't met yet, started in January of 2002. I had lost my beloved Kaiser, a 13 year-old Rottweiler, to a bowel infarction 3 months earlier. As all of you know who have experienced the loss of a beloved pet, it is a devastating life experience. I tried to get past the grief, but I found that I missed a big furry dog to wrap my arms around, the simple comfort of doing daily dog-caretaking activities, and seeing the world through my dog's eyes. So I pushed the guilt aside, prayed for Kaiser's blessing, and started looking.

After falling in love with a Rott-Lab mix at Table Mountain Animal Shelter, only to have him adopted by someone else later that day, I cried all the way home, wondering when the heartache would ever end.

The next day, on a Sunday, I was going through the mail and came across a pamphlet from a place called "[Best Friends Animal Sanctuary](#)", the country's largest no-kill animal sanctuary, located in southern Utah. There was a picture of two dogs, a Rottie and his girlfriend, so I immediately called and asked if the Rottie was up for adoption. I was told that they have many dogs that come there because of unjust circumstances in which there has been an "incident" and they come to live out the rest of their lives there rather than be "put down". The Rottie in the picture was not adoptable because of a similar story. So, I inquired about other adoptable Rotties and was told the director for the adoptions would E-mail me.

The next day, I was sent pictures via E-mail of all the adoptable Rottie -mixes that they had. All of them looked cute, but then came the last picture. This one said: "Here's a picture of Rusty...he's our favorite Rottie mix". When I looked at that picture, I knew instantly, without hesitation, that he was "the one". He looked like a big red Rottie with the wisest, but saddest eyes I'd ever seen. I wanted to replace that look with joy. I called that day and made arrangements to come to Utah in three weeks to spend a week volunteering and to adopt Rusty. I begged them not to adopt him until I saw him and then proceeded to call them every week to make sure they hadn't!

My trip started on a Friday night after work, and by 1pm the following day, arrived at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary. I drove to the parking lot of "Dogtown" headquarters at Best Friends, and as I turned off the ignition, I looked up. I was staring into the eyes of a big red dog sitting right in front of my truck in an outside pen. The sadness in his eyes made me sure

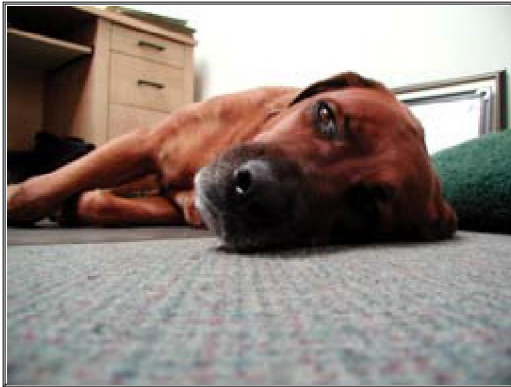


it was Rusty, and within 15 minutes I was on my first walk with him. We went on a 20-minute walk with a large group of volunteers with other dogs. I noticed that Rusty didn't seem to pay attention to anyone except for one young woman who worked there, named Nova. She was at the front of the group and he strained the entire walk to keep her in sight. He was so focused on her that he was oblivious to me. So I asked her about Rusty and she told me that she was the one who brought him to Best Friends. Her part of the story goes like this:

She and another woman had been driving to work at Best Friends one day, and saw a car screech to a halt in front of her. Rusty had been hit in the head by a car traveling about 50 mph, and was unconscious when they reached him. The owner was at a park across the road and without getting up from his lawn chair, yelled over "Is he dead?" When they said no, he told them to take him to the clinic at Best Friends because they'd take care of him. He didn't even know they worked there. Two days later, he showed up at the clinic and said belligerently "If my dog's not dead, I want him back", never paid a cent and walked out with Rusty.

Nova was just sick at the thought of Rusty going back to that owner, but there was nothing they could do to stop it.

A few days later, Nova was driving past the same area where Rusty had gotten hit, and there he was again on the side of the road! This time she stopped, loaded him into the back of her Jeep and drove to the owner's house. She rang the doorbell with Rusty in tow, and when the owner showed up, confronted him. She said "Now that I've met Rusty in a conscious state, he's a really nice dog. I don't want to drive by and see him dead on the road, so what are you going to do about keeping that from happening?" He said "Do you want him?" and when Nova replied "Yes, I do", he said "Then take him". That started Rusty's new life at Best Friends.



He fell in love with Nova for rescuing him, and he sat in his pen always waiting and watching for a glimpse of her. She said to me "Every day Rusty asks me to take him home. Every day I tell him that I would love to, but I already have my hands full with a two-year old daughter and a BIG energetic Doberman puppy". She gave him as much love as she could during the day, but couldn't take him home. Nevertheless, Rusty never stopped asking!

After hearing all that, I understood why Rusty was so bonded to Nova. I was discouraged at the end of that first day, and wondered if he'd ever even notice me, but I figured I had a week to win his heart.

The next day, I decided after my volunteer duties at the clinic were over to take Rusty on a walk alone, instead of with the usual large group of dogs. We started out, and after about half an hour, I realized that I was lost. Best Friends Animal Sanctuary covers many acres of desert and canyon lands, and I'd left the designated dog-walking path. Kaiser had always enjoyed hikes, and in my desperation to get Rusty to like me, I thought a hike might do the trick. Since it was only my second day there, soon I'd gotten turned around and had no idea which way would get us back to Dogtown. I kept talking to Rusty, asking him to find the way back, and though he seemed eager to help, didn't seem to have a clue as to the way back to Dogtown. My mind was filled with all the potential dangers, like dehydration, exposure, snakebites, etc. After what seemed like an eternity, I heard a car,

followed the sound to a road, and followed the road back to Dogtown! We'd been gone close to two hours, and the usual recommended time for the walks was 20 minutes! Oops! I got fresh water for Rusty, put him back in his pen, and this time he looked sad when I started to leave! I was encouraged, but still didn't want to get my hopes up and be disappointed. When I came back from lunch and parked in front of his pen, he was lying in the dirt, napping. But as soon as he recognized me, he ran over to the fence, wagging his entire body, and gave me the first of his characteristic "snarl" smiles (you know, where only one side of his mouth



curls up in a smile). He was ecstatic in his eagerness to see me! Finally, I'd had the breakthrough I needed to his heart! It seems that Rusty shared my love of adventures! From that day on, we were bonded, and I took him home to the motel with me every night. As we spent our days and nights together, it seemed like we'd known each other a very long time, like friends who upon first meeting, find so much in common. He seemed eager to please me and so grateful for every kind word and touch. I could only image what his previous life had been like. So the next day, I asked Nova if she had any information about his life before she found him. She told me that the previous owner had gotten Rusty from a shelter where he'd been left when his family had moved away and chosen not to take him. Rusty's previous owner then presumably chose Rusty for protection, because he subsequently left him in the backyard to guard the house while he took off for 3 months at a time! A neighbor would come and give him food and water occasionally, but Rusty learned to escape from the yard. He had certainly had his share of abandonment and neglect.

After Rusty came home and the honeymoon period wore off, we battled the common problems that rescued dogs often exhibit: Separation anxiety, fear aggression, escape artist tendencies and a strong prey instinct, causing bodily injury to anyone holding onto a leash when the instinct kicked in! I had had no experience with these problems, having raised Kaiser from puppy hood with extensive obedience training. I was extremely disheartened, but friends who had also rescued dogs assured me that he'd improve with time and love. So I enlisted the help of Dr. Dan Estep, an animal behaviorist, who really helped with suggestions and in supporting me! I also found out that Rusty's constant scratching was not allergies, as the vet had diagnosed, but was a LICE infestation! It took two injections of Ivermectin and many loads of laundry to make both of us comfortable!



It's been two years and three months since Rusty came to live with me, and the power of love and consistency has worked its magic with Rusty. Although we still have some polishing to do, Rusty has made tremendous progress. He goes to work with me and is obedient, patient and greatly loved by everyone. He is a favorite at the local dog park and at his doggy day care. To my great relief, he shows no signs of aggression at the vet's anymore. He passed an obedience class with flying colors, and to my great astonishment and delight, passed the certification for Denver Pet Partners! I had wanted to do work with pet therapy for years, but Kaiser wasn't suited for it. And after Rusty manifested all the behavioral problems, I thought that the chances of doing pet therapy with him were

slim to non-existent. Thanks to all the people who have helped, supported and encouraged us, we now

have a chance to share the loving heart of this wonderful partner of mine.

Through the abandonment and neglect he suffered, he never stopped trusting or loving people. He puts his whole heart into all he does and loves everyone he meets. He has been and will continue to be an example to me of unconditional love and never-ending trust. Many people ask me upon meeting Rusty if I rescued him. I always answer "No, Rusty rescued me."



Editor's Note:

This is such a testimony to the value of second (and third, in Rusty's case) chances and a powerful lesson of what unconditional acceptance is all about. It's been said that "great purpose knows no bounds". What better example of this than Diane & Rusty coming together. I learned somewhere once to not believe everything that I hear and, read because the words can be clear, but the truth still obscured. This is so true in Diane's experience with hearing of the inhumane treatment which Rusty endured and while her heart told her that this was the dog for her, she had no idea what would unfold if she adopted a dog with such an under-privileged past. I firmly believe that rescue dogs know that they have been rescued and, as a result, develop an extraordinary bond which stems from an awareness of being accepted into a new pack with the security of a kind and benevolent leader, and a sense of permanence that erases the stress from prior dysfunctional environments.

Rusty, you innocently came into this world predisposed to trust and with the ability to dispense great affection. This wonderful trust was badly abused but, thankfully, your spirit was strong and your core nature persevered. You deserve every ounce of love and affectionate attention that is bestowed upon you. Those of us who know your story are deeply touched by the love and affection that you now willingly bestow on people; people who, like you, have been given a second chance to treat another living being with the respect and dignity it deserves.

Diane, this quote is for you and Rusty. Before Rusty, you were missing something and you weren't sure what was meant to fill that void. Your heart is settled now that you have Rusty because you and he were meant to be together.

"No one is ever so lost that he ceases to be missed by the one who loves him most." (Gary Stanley)

Diana McQuarrie