

SPOTTY'S STORY

Once in a lifetime, if you are lucky, heaven blesses you with a friend like Spotty.

Not only did Spotty enrich my life immeasurably, his presence in it saved the lives of countless orphaned dogs and cats and helped them to find loving forever homes.

My blessing came in a mystical way when on a chilly, gray Sunday morning in late winter I found an enormous Rottweiler sleeping in my backyard. He was clearly a stray and, being concerned about his safety on my busy road, I called the Middlebury Police Department to pick him up and transport him to the animal shelter. He did not go quietly and I felt compelled to visit him at the shelter later that day. When I arrived, the facility was closing. I was unable to see him but I was told he was there, safe and secure in a kennel run.

Over the next several days, I thought about the Rottweiler frequently. The following week, I again felt compelled to go to the shelter to check on him. This time, I was able to visit him. To my surprise, the dog that had graciously accepted treats and pats on the head from me the week before, lunged aggressively at his cage door when I approached. My heart sank as I realized the likely fate of this beautiful creature. In hindsight, I know that he was sent from heaven to lead me to Spotty and to rescue work.

As I turned to leave my eyes fell upon a large, strikingly handsome black and white barking bundle of energy in the next kennel run. It was Spotty and it was love at first sight! He seemed to be smiling at me as I approached his kennel door to make his acquaintance. He greeted me by pressing his side against the cage door in an effort to be petted. He thoroughly enjoyed the attention as I scratched the side of his belly and his head. He then grabbed a tennis ball and threw it up in the air. This boy wanted to play! I did my best to accommodate his wishes by pushing the ball toward the inside of the kennel and he happily gave chase. Despite the fact that he was homeless and living in a cage at a shelter, his indomitable spirit shown through.

Spotty's bio was written on a laminated card that hung on the outside of his cage door. I learned from reading the card that he had been turned over to the possession of Animals For Life (AFL, the rescue organization was renting space at the Middlebury animal shelter) *three years* earlier by owners that loved him but due to unfortunate circumstances could not keep him. During those three years, he had been adopted and returned three times and AFL was now looking for the absolutely perfect home for Spotty. I could understand why AFL didn't want to risk another failed adoption for Spotty but I couldn't fathom why such a great dog had such a tragic history!

My obsession with Spotty began then and there. I had lost my thirteen year old Dalmatian, Oreo to cancer five months earlier. He had been a good companion to my other dog, Watson who was then nearly 17 years old and seemed to miss his buddy. I thought that adopting Spotty would be good for Watson and since Spotty was obviously in desperate need of a home I inquired about it. I was crushed when the shelter manager

told me that Spotty was dog-aggressive and that he could not go to a home with another dog. Although I could not adopt Spotty I certainly did not forget about him.

I visited Spotty at the shelter from time-to-time over the next few months. It broke my heart to see his picture and a plea for an adoptive home for him in ads in the local papers again and again. I couldn't understand why he had not found a home. I found it strange that Spotty was in my thoughts so often.

Sadly, two months after I met Spotty, I said my final goodbye to Watson who had been my companion for over 16 years. I was now without a dog for the first time in my life and my house never felt so empty. Soon, I was drawn back to the animal shelter, this time to volunteer with AFL as a dog walker. I was still grieving over the loss of Watson and it was comforting to be in the presence of so many wonderful dogs. I had a strong sense that I needed them as much as they needed me but I was not emotionally ready to adopt another dog quite yet.

I now spent time walking and playing with Spotty several times a week and our bond grew stronger. I watched with sadness as potential adopters came and went without giving Spotty a second look. It always seemed that when someone did show an interest in adopting him they were turned down as adopters because they had another pet in the house. I often left the shelter in tears as another day went by and Spotty remained homeless.

As time passed and Spotty and I became best friends, I again asked if I could adopt him. To my disbelief, I was turned down. I have had dogs my entire life and would go to the ends of the earth to insure their well-being. The shelter manager in charge at that time had several very specific criteria that Spotty's potential adopter must meet. She insisted that he go to a home with kids (I do not have any), that he have a yard with a physical fence (I had an electric one), that his home could not be too close to neighbor's homes because he barks all day (I did fit that criteria), and that any neighbors not have cats or dogs because he would attack them (there were other pets in my neighborhood).

As a result of the shelter manager's stance on my adoption of Spotty and our disagreement on several other issues, our relationship became strained. It deteriorated to the point that I no longer wanted to volunteer for AFL altogether because of her hostility. Most days it took every ounce of resolve I had to face her when I went to the shelter to volunteer. I stayed and tolerated the toxic atmosphere that she created only because of Spotty. I vowed that I would remain as a volunteer with AFL until he had a forever home!

About 8 months after I started volunteering for AFL, the situation took an interesting turn when the Board of Directors replaced the shelter manager. The interim manager suggested that I take Spotty home with me for a trial visit. I was excited but terrified at the same time as a several months earlier, I had adopted Annie, a Border Collie mix who was half the size of Spotty. On two different occasions I had witnessed Spotty's dog-aggression first hand when unprovoked; he attacked pit bulls at the shelter and gave them

a good fight. I knew that if he attacked Annie, she could be seriously injured or even killed. Still, something within me said I must try.

For the first four days of Spotty's visit, he and Annie were kept apart except for two or three walks in a large open area each day when he was muzzled and only she was off leash. It was difficult to read his behavior as he would lunge at Annie from time-to-time but did not appear to be acting aggressively.

On the fifth day I was attempting to put Spotty back into the basement after feeding him. He stubbornly (oh, and Spotty had a real stubborn streak!) refused, rolled over on his back on the kitchen floor and silently but somehow clairvoyantly, communicated to me that he wanted a chance to prove to me that he could peacefully coexist with Annie, that I could trust him. I sat down on the floor next to him and told him I would give him a chance but that the only way he could make his forever home with me was if he promised never to harm Annie in any way. He agreed and he never broke his promise. He had finally found his forever home.

Spotty and Annie made a great pair. Spotty lived to chase balls. Annie, acting out her herding instincts, loved to chase Spotty as he chased balls. He gave chase with such tunnel vision that he wasn't fazed as Annie nipped at him; body slammed him and jumped on him like a middle linebacker. If he even noticed, he never seemed to mind.

Spotty had a personality like no other dog that I have ever known. He was smart, athletic, happy-go-lucky, loved life and had an amazing sense of humor. He loved people, especially kids and always greeted visitors by dropping a ball at their feet. If nobody was available to play, he would entertain himself by throwing his ball up in the air, catching it and throwing it up again. If he was bored he would go into the wooded portion of our property search out a huge fallen branch and he would run around the yard with it for a while before lying down to chew it. Other times, he would find a bush and play tug-of-war with it. One of his favorite tricks was to place his ball in the path of the lawnmower. It was uncanny the way he knew just where to place it so on the next pass, the person mowing the lawn would have to stop and kick it out of the way and of course he would chase it. This game continued until the lawn was completely cut.

Spotty was happiest when in the company of his "people". He loved to go for rides in the car and often spent weekends in Vermont or on the beaches of Cape Cod of Rhode Island. Swimming was another of Spotty's passions but he also loved to run alongside our mountain bikes as we rode on wooded trails. In the summertime, he would jump up on the double chaise lounge on the screened in porch and settle in between his Dog Mom and Dog Dad and watch Red Sox games. He was an avid Sox fan! In the winter, his favorite sport was to run alongside the snowblower and jump up to bite the snow as it shot out of the machine or leap up to catch snowballs to eat.

Spotty remained selectively dog-aggressive his entire life. I learned after meeting his original owner that he had acquired that trait only after entering the shelter and that he had played peacefully with other dogs in his pre-shelter days. It is understandable how

the stress of the shelter can cause a dog living in one for such a long time can cause that behavior to develop. Despite his display of aggression toward other dogs, surprisingly enough Spotty was completely accepting of two subsequent canine additions to the family and never made an attempt to harm them.

Spotty was the reason I stayed at AFL and continued my rescue-work in the early days and I have never stopped. Back when the AFL shelter manager was removed, the Board of Directors hired the organization's first full-time paid shelter manager and money was needed to cover her salary. As a result, the fundraising had to be brought to a much higher level and quickly and I became an integral part of that effort. I was elected to the position of Director of Development and implemented and chaired most of the fundraising events. AFL was at a critical stage in its existence when I stepped in to take over the fundraising and it is quite likely that the organization would have folded without my efforts. Fortunately, it was able to continue its life-saving work.

I know I sound egotistical but I assure you that in my heart, I am truly not. All of the credit for what I did for AFL belongs to Spotty and Spotty alone. He was the only reason that I did not leave AFL in those early days. He is the reason that the organization had me as a volunteer to lead the way when money had to be raised to keep the shelter doors open. Spotty was and will always be my inspiration as I to continue to put my heart and soul into rescue work.

My days as a volunteer with AFL are over but Spotty continues to inspire me to perform rescue work. In 2012, I founded Spotty Dog Rescue, Inc., a foster based canine rescue organization named after the dog that started it all.

My wonderful, sweet, inspirational Boy left this life in June of 2010. Spotty was closing in on his 15th birthday and although his spirit and puppy-like looks and charms remained, his body was giving out on him. Despite all of my efforts, and there was nothing I wouldn't have done to help him, he was in a great deal of pain and his quality of life was gone. It was time for the ultimate act of love that would release his beautiful spirit from the body that was now such a burden to him. My life will never be the same without Spotty. We had a spiritual connection that I have never experienced with any other living being.

My belief system tells me that Spotty and I will one day be reunited. Even now, I often feel his presence. Until we are together again, I will continue to fulfill his legacy by being involved in rescue work. Every creature whose life I have helped to save in the past and every creature whose life I help to save in the future, owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to Spotty.