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From Shelters to **Forever Homes**





Who says **YOUR SOULMATE** has to be human? Here are 5 animal-owner connections that will warm your heart — and their stories all started with a rescue.

By **HELEN BOND**
Photography by **KATHY TRAN**

THE NEXT TIME you consider getting a pet, Seandhi Vincent wants you to think about Daisy Mae.

Daisy Mae is Vincent's 13-and-a-half-year-old red Australian cattle dog mix adopted from the SPCA of Texas. Vincent wasn't looking for a permanent relationship with a pet when she came across Daisy Mae's online profile in 2022. She recently had said goodbye to Dottie Mae, her Jack Russell Terrier rescue, and thought fostering might be a better fit this time.

Still, Vincent couldn't sleep that night, worrying that Daisy Mae's age and large size would make it tough for the older pup to find a forever home.

"There is no way I could not get this dog," Vincent says. "I felt like this was my other little dog telling me I needed another dog, so I went from Dottie Mae to Daisy Mae."

Since then, Vincent has formed a special bond with Daisy Mae, whom she calls "one of the best dogs" she's ever had. She is a big proponent of adoption and encourages others to follow her lead.

"People continue to breed animals and try to buy animals, and there are all these animals out there in need," Vincent says.

Pet adoption saves lives in more ways than one. Not only are you giving your rescue a second chance, but it also frees up space to provide a safe haven for another animal.

Dallas area shelters are bursting at the seams with lost, surrendered, mistreated and abandoned pets, an overcrowding problem shared by animal welfare and rescue groups across the nation.

Dallas Animal Services (DAS), one of the country's largest municipal shelters, takes in dozens of dogs and cats each day, far outpacing placements. The situation is particularly dire for dogs. A recent daily snapshot revealed that DAS was 135% over capacity for canines, with 300 kennels available to house more than 400 dogs.

While adopting comes with many rewards, there are also potential challenges to keep in mind. It's important to ensure it's the right match for both you and any potential pet.

It took quite a bit of time for Daisy Mae to find her right match. Shelter born in October 2010, she had swiftly found a new home with a young couple, where she lived for 11 years until they surrendered her back, citing the difficulties of caring for the dog alongside their three small children. Daisy Mae was adopted again, only to be returned to the shelter a month later.

All this uncertainty took its toll on the "super smart" dog, says Vincent, a human relations manager for Circle K. When



Daisy Mae, a senior Australian cattle dog mix, "is one of the best dogs" owner Seandhi Vincent has ever had.

Daisy Mae came home with her, the 70-pound pooch was taking medications for anxiety and depression — which Vincent was told the dog would probably need for the rest of her life.

It turns out that all Daisy Mae needed was Vincent.

Daisy Mae settled in quickly under her new (and permanent) owner's loving care, and within six weeks, she was weaned off the medications. Trauma can linger in rescue pets, though; Daisy Mae still experiences some anxiety. Vet visits, in particular, seem to trigger memories of the past. Whenever Vincent travels, she leaves Daisy Mae with the same trusted family member or close friend to ensure the dog feels safe and secure.

These days, Daisy Mae remains exceptionally healthy and is living her best dog life. She loves riding the elevator in Vincent's downtown Dallas high rise, walking to the park and joining Vincent on road trips to visit family in Louisiana. She's also known to bark and rhythmically howl along to the "Happy Birthday" song.

"She's been a really, really good dog and a great story, especially for older dogs who are difficult to adopt out. [Older dogs] are great dogs," Vincent says.



EVERY PET RESCUE is a celebration. Here are four more special stories of North Texas animals and the people who said **"yes" to adoption**.



Zadie

FOUGHT TO SURVIVE

Zadie was just under 2 weeks old when an animal control officer saved her from a bed of fire ants in Junction, Texas. The insects had ravaged the dehydrated, calico-colored kitten, attacking her tiny body and leaving her blinded.

Fighting for her life, Zadie was bottle-fed and cared for by a foster family until an emergency transfer came through to transport her to the Rees-Jones Foundation Medical Wing at Operation Kindness in Carrollton. There, she was nursed back to health until she was strong enough to have her damaged eyes surgically removed.

Enter Gretchen Felber, a volunteer for the lifesaving shelter, who didn't know the backstory when she opened the kennel door to greet Zadie in March. "She obviously couldn't see me, but she came right up to me and let me pet her," Felber says. "I wasn't planning on taking home a cat that day, but I just couldn't resist. She was just so sweet."

For a cat who has spent most of her young life confined to a kennel, Zadie, now 7 months old, continues to thrive — fearlessly adjusting to her new world in Felber's Addison home. She loves to sleep in the sun and is making friends with Felber's 8-year-old orange tabby rescue, Ziggy, who wears a bell to prevent surprises.

Felber marvels at Zadie's resilience. If she walks into a wall or another object, she just keeps going. "It's amazing to see how far she has come," says Felber. And she's growing more confident every day. "Ziggy is always waiting for me when I open the garage door, and now, all of a sudden, when I come home, Zadie is sitting there with him waiting, too."



Alani

WORTH THE WAIT

Friendly, energetic and "super goofy," Alani loves to lick anything and everyone and never wants to leave her owner's side. "She's a total Velcro dog," says Reese Clifford, who adopted the 4-year-old red-nosed bulldog mix in August 2023.

When you see Alani in the loving arms of Clifford, you would never imagine her tough past. From the time the Richardson Humane Society answered a shelter's plea for help in finding Alani a place to call home, it took 940 days.

Alani's breed, selective demeanor around other dogs and somewhat hyper nature requiring medication made adoption more difficult. She spent four months at a boarding facility and two years with a caring foster family. Despite online adoption posts, there was little interest in the stocky, 45-pound dog who could easily knock someone down when excitedly greeting them.

Clifford — a volunteer for The Love Pit, a local nonprofit rescue group for bully breeds — came across Alani's profile at the right time. The 25-year-old had experienced a rough year personally and professionally, and with things looking up, she was ready for a new beginning with a rescue dog.

Clifford fell in love instantly. After meeting her several times, she took Alani home to briefly foster, ensuring it was a good fit for both before officially adopting her. While the transition, accompanied by loads of positive reinforcement, has been "pretty seamless," Clifford says there's never a dull moment with Alani, who has her own Instagram page *(@alanithepittie)*.

"I just love her so much," Clifford says. "I'm all about anyone or anything that's the underdog, so that's the No. 1 thing that drew me to her," Clifford says. "I thought, 'The odds are stacked against her — how can I help?'"

Along the way, the two have helped heal each other.



Walker

FROM RESCUE TO SERVICE DOG

Walker is a second-chance success story for many reasons. Once at risk of being euthanized, the 80-pound black Labrador mix has found his place as a service dog for children and a forever person in Sarah Belanger, a school counselor at Dover Elementary School in Richardson.

Walker is the first service dog placed through the From Shelter to Service Dog program, a collaboration forged in 2023 between Oregon-based Dogs for Better Lives (DBL) and Operation Kindness.

Initially surrendered to a municipal shelter by his elderly owner, Walker landed at Operation Kindness, where he was adopted out several times but always returned because he was very selective about responding to people. He underwent a remarkable transformation after a long-term stay in a foster home with an Operation Kindness volunteer, who worked closely with an assistance-dog trainer from DBL.

Belanger, whose sister-in-law is a semiretired veterinarian and sits on the DBL board, started the intense application process for the program a year ago. After Walker was placed with her in January, the pair worked with trainers at home and at school for four days to prepare for their new partnership.

Belanger believes there is a healing place for dogs in schools. "I've been an animal lover all my life. And I know what an animal can do to make me feel better," says Belanger. "I felt like if I was able to do that for children and other teachers, I certainly want to do that."

Walker can sense if a child is upset or sad. Through a series of one-word commands, Belanger can direct the dog to press his head on a child's leg, place his front legs across a lap "like a weighted blanket," or roll over on his side to allow them to put their head on the dog or sit beside him. So far, he's been a big hit.

"The kids are in awe of him," Belanger says.



Molly

QUEEN OF HUGGING

Kimberly Harry was still grieving the loss of her rescue dog when she started combing the online pet adoption site Petfinder and spotted the photo of a "scrawny, little white dog." The bichon mix named Polly, who now goes by Molly, was just a year old when she was found roaming the streets of Mesquite and taken to a municipal shelter. Later, she was rescued by Paws in the City on the day she was scheduled to be euthanized.

"After I adopted her, they sent me a picture of what she looked like when she was picked up. She was shaved halfway up her body from her tail and was filthy, dirty and greasy. But you could see that little smile coming through on her face," Harry says. "I can see why she didn't get adopted, but at least the people there recognized what a nice dog she is."

Under Harry's care, Molly blossomed and put on some much-needed weight, going from 15 to 22 pounds. She is an "absolute tomboy" who has ruled the roost of their East Dallas home for six years. Her only job is to chase squirrels, and she takes that very seriously, says Harry, who with her husband has owned as many as four rescue dogs at once.

"She puts her paws around you and hugs you," Harry says. "This dog is so sweet and loves everybody. I don't know why anybody wouldn't want her. She is absolutely the best and happiest dog."