

The Lady



Friday, 28 September 2012

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MEET THE WAGS

Westies, spaniels, collies and retrievers are all among a van load of abandoned dogs in desperate need of help. Melonie Clarke sets off to meet a unique band of 'dog fosterers' committed to finding these special creatures a 'forever' home...

By Melonie Clarke

On a beautifully hot Sunday in September I should be sitting on a beach or in the park enjoying the glorious sun, which has been so rare this summer. Instead, I find myself sitting in a service station off the M4 near Reading. Why, you ask? Well, it's not because it's a particularly great hot spot for sunbathers.

This Sunday, like any other, come rain, shine or snow, the M4 service station is the last stop for a white transit van travelling from Wales, with a very special cargo. Contraband or stolen goods? No. At several service stations along the M4, groups of committed volunteers wait in their cars for the arrival of the Many Tears Animal Rescue (MTAR) van, eagerly waiting to give a homeless dog a loving home.

The centre is a small, not-for-profit dog-rescue based in south Wales set up by Sylvia Van Atta and her husband, Bill. They have set up a network of dog fosterers across the UK (with Surrey having the strongest network of fosterers), so unwanted and unloved dogs can have a home until they find their 'forever' homes.

This journey up and down the M4 every Sunday to meet their 'fosterers' enables them to re-home 200 dogs per month, crucial when you take into account that 15 new dogs are left at the centre every week. In the main, the dogs that are taken in are ex-breeding dogs but Many Tears will take in any dog in need of a home.

The rescued animals are fostered for however long it takes to find them a permanent or 'forever' home. Although all of the kennels at the charity's HQ are of a very high standard, by placing the dogs in foster homes they are rehabilitated quicker, so it takes less time to find their 'forever' home.



Clockwise from left: Roy the blind collie, Mel meets the spaniels at Many Tears Animal Rescue, A Many Tears Dog and Westie Lady Sweetie (right) before she became The Lady's newest recruit

Many of them have only ever lived in a cage, which makes the outside world a bewildering place. Invariably, they have never been walked on a lead and are not house-trained – although all fosterers say they are quick learners. Also, they have never experienced the love and warmth of living in a home. When taking in a foster dog from Many Tears, no matter what age the dog, fosterers will have to start from scratch when training them. The dogs are placed with fosterers who already have a dog so they can learn from the dog in residence.

When I join the fosterers waiting for the van at Reading, I am made to feel hugely welcome. To while away the waiting time, they have a picnic and compare notes on the doggies. One of the fosterers isn't going to be fostering today but he has brought along his three cavalier King Charles spaniels, just to say hello to everyone.

Anthony Denness has fostered dogs since 2011: 'I adopted my dog from Many Tears. I went to pick her up from the centre and a week afterwards I signed up to be a fosterer.' Since then, Anthony has fostered three bichon frises, a shih-tzu and countless cavaliers. He has loved them all but Anthony stresses that it's important to be able to pass them on.

As another fosterer clarifies, 'If I kept every dog I fostered, I wouldn't have room to help more dogs, which is the most important thing.'

When the van finally pulls into the service station, the sound of barking is quite clear and we all gather round. Shaking and scared, one by one the dogs are taken out of the van and given to people whose only desire is to give a dog the love it deserves. Westies, King Charles spaniels, golden retrievers – all delightful creatures who just need help. Some of them, like Roy the blind collie, will need extra-special love.



Three of the dogs who have been through the doors at Many Tears Animal Rescue

I must say I am grateful to be wearing sunglasses to hide the tears that welled in my eyes every time another terrified and neglected dog was taken out of the van. I had accompanied Rosie Bartlett to Reading as my guide. Rosie has already adopted two Westies and a retriever but today would be giving a foster home to a shaking little Westie with bald patches – the dogs often suffer from hair loss brought on by anxiety. This sweet little threeyear- old sat on my lap all the way back to London and it was a wrench to hand her over when we finally arrived home.

All the animals are spayed and inoculated before being re-homed and all the charity asks is for a £170 donation towards the costs. For Sylvia Van Atta, the work really is a calling. She had been working with rescue dogs (mainly ex-breeding dogs) for years before she and Bill started Many Tears. 'It came about because I really wanted to help the dogs that breeders had finished with. I wanted to give them a chance for a future.'

Although Many Tears helps ex-breeding dogs in the main, Sylvia says it really doesn't matter where the dogs come from, or what nationality they are (they also do lots of work in Ireland where almost 50,000 puppies are bred each year).

'They are a life that needs saving and that's what we try to do.'

Sylvia and Bill started Many Tears in 2004 when they purchased some rundown kennels in south Wales. After spending a lot of time and money they opened their doors to help any and every dog they could: 'From helping only 200 dogs a year, we now help over 2,000. We hope the good we do will rub off on others.



'We have wonderful people all over the place with our fostering scheme and as much as the dogs get help it also helps people. There is nothing in life better than to help somebody – animal or person, it doesn't matter. I'm here to help dogs so I just do what I can,' Sylvia tells me.

'We are determined to help people to understand how special a dog is. All dogs are good, it's their life that makes them what they are and people are starting to give more rescue dogs a chance.'

So what does the future hold for Many Tears? 'We can't plan to win the lottery in the future, sadly, so our main aim is to just keep doing what we are doing. The ultimate goal is not to shut down.'

The resounding message that is evident after talking to the fosterers and Sylvia is that even if you cannot take in a dog, everyone can be a part of Many Tears. Whether it's being a part of their dog fostering scheme or merely buying an item from one of their shops, the proceeds of which go towards the charity, 'people who help us are very special,' says Sylvia.

Many Tears is a starting block for so many dogs in need of a loving home. And I sincerely hope that Many Tears is able to continue to do what it does best.

For more information about Many Tears Animal Rescue: 01269-843084, www.manytearsrescue.org – call between the hours of 10am to 3pm, or email info@manytearsrescue.org

Photography by Paula May Evans.
