

Going dotty



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Dog fostering

'We're a stepping stone to a forever home'

Homeless dogs are being given new hope by foster carers who look after them until they can be found new homes. Suzanne Savill meets one local carer and two dogs she has nursed back to health. Pictures: Steve Roberts

Their eyes are shining brightly, their coats are glossy and their tails are constantly wagging. It is hard to believe that the two lively little dogs bustling around the spacious kitchen of Sue Ashman's home near Bristol were close to death just a few months ago. "When they were found they were desperately thin and had such terrible mange they had hardly any fur," says Sue of the two dogs, who have been called Mercy and Pity. "It was impossible to tell what type of dogs they were, or how old they were. They were a complete mess." Mercy and Pity were discovered near the Many Tears animal rescue centre, after apparently being dumped from a passing car on a freezing cold night in January. "Mercy was found in the car park and Pity was lying in the middle of the road. She was lucky not to have been run over," says Sue. "Many Tears looked after them before I took over as a foster carer, as they won't let any dog go to a foster home if they think their health is too poor. "But even so they were very

ill when they arrived here. Mercy arrived first as she wasn't so ill, and Pity arrived the following week. "Like Mercy she was undernourished and had terrible mange, and she also had an injury to her leg and an eye infection. "They came with lots of pills and potions and creams, and they had to have baths to help with their mange." The severe mange which meant Mercy and Pity had hardly any fur when they were dumped near the Many Tears animal rescue centre in South Wales was not contagious.

Sue, 58, who has fostered more than 20 dogs over the past year since she and her husband moved to Churchill, near Bristol, explains: "It was probably the result of being stressed, and the mange not getting treated which resulted in it spreading. "I don't know how they got into such a condition. "Sometimes you know a dog's history, sometimes you know nothing. "Many Tears take in all sorts of dogs. Some might be ex-breeding dogs that need to get used to living in a family home, or some might be

much-loved pets whose owner has died or can no longer keep them for some reason. "But in many cases it's impossible to know what sort of life a dog had before it came to Many Tears. "In every case, all that a lot of the dogs that come here through Many Tears need is time and patience." Mercy and Pity show just how much can be achieved by foster carers who are prepared to give time and patience to the homeless dogs that come through Many Tears. "Now that their fur has grown back and they have put on weight it has been possible to see that Mercy is a Yorkshire terrier aged about two, and Pity is a Cavalier cross aged about one. "They both love people but they're such opposites. Within a few days Mercy was full of energy and now she is such a busy little thing, while Pity is very quiet and gentle." Sue was already looking after a foster dog and two puppies - in addition to her own three dogs - when Mercy and Pity arrived. "It was a bit busy, but they all got on really well," she says. "My dogs are brilliant. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be able to foster some of the very



difficult cases that I do. "For the first few days you are trying to get a new dog to know you and trust you, and it helps that they can see the relationship that I have with my dogs. "They will follow the pack: if the pack are frightened and wary then they will be, but if the pack are happy and trust me then they will do, too." The fact that Mercy and Pity have recovered from their ordeal means a happy ending for them as they will go to a permanent new home - yet it will also mean a sad farewell for Sue. "Every time a foster dog goes you cry, and if you don't you shouldn't be fostering," says Sue, who has seen all her foster dogs successfully rehomed. "But you've got to remember that we're a stepping stone from the life that they previously led into a proper life in a forever home. "They have such a close bond that I was determined that their permanent home would be one where they could be together. "I wasn't going to let them be parted. They went to hell and back together and I wanted them to stay together - and that's what is happening."



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Some people become dog fosterers because they do not have a dog of their own. Sue Ashman explains: "If you are a dog person then this is a good way to have a dog without the commitment, because you can make sure only to foster when you will not be away on holiday." However, Sue fosters dogs for Many Tears in addition to caring for her own three dogs, which she brought back to the UK as rescued dogs from Cyprus, where she lived for nearly four years because of her husband's job. Before moving to the Bristol area about a year ago, Sue lived in Cambridge - where she also fostered dogs for Many Tears. She tends to care for the harder-to-home dogs. "I've always enjoyed working with animals and I particularly enjoy working with dogs," she says. "As a foster carer, you need to be able to get a dog back into top condition and to make sure they are a good family dogs. Only then are they ready to go to a new home. "Many Tears is a great organisation to foster for, as they provide every single thing you need. "It's up to you whether you choose to buy your own food or not, but if necessary they will provide all sorts of things, from bedding to food. "They are excellent in their support to fosterers. Anything I ring them about they will come back to you, and any practical help you need they are there. "If I'm concerned about a home that they will be going to then they will listen to me because I know the dogs and what they need to go to and who is going to be best for them." The amount of time that a foster dog spends with Sue varies - and so does the type of dog. "The shortest length of time we've had a foster dog was about two days," she says. "Mercy and Pity are probably the ones we've had longest at about 15 weeks. "The smallest dog we've taken was a Jack Russell puppy and the largest was a Great Dane, and we've had just about every other shape and size of dog in between!" Many Tears would like to recruit more dog fosterers in the Bristol area. For further information go to www.manytearsrescue.webs.com.



RECOVERED: Mercy and Pity were in a terrible condition when they were found in January, left. But, thanks to Sue Ashman's care, they're now happy, healthy dogs

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