



“The general public is not aware of how doomed black dogs are when they are brought to a pound.”

Basic Black

Don't judge a dog by his color

by Deb Hipp

When Tamara Delaney of Woodville, Wis., volunteered to find a home for a black Labrador Retriever named Jake last year, she had no idea what she was up against. Jake, cared for by a rescue group, had already waited nearly three years for a new home.



And he would wait eight more months as Delaney tried to find someone to take in the big Lab.

It didn't matter much that Jake was a sociable dog and in perfect health. Jake's problem wasn't his temperament—it was the color of his coat. Jake bore the stigma of the “BBD,” an acronym used to refer to big black dogs, who are frequently passed over for flashier, prettier dogs, and wind up, like Jake, waiting for years to be adopted.

“Nobody wants a black-coated dog,” rescue workers told Delaney as she tried without success to find a home for Jake.

And when Delaney turned to the Internet, she found that shelters across the country were overflowing with black-coated mutts.

“Please don't overlook our black dogs,” rescue groups pleaded on their home pages above pictures of Rottweilers, Chows and Labs sporting bright bandannas. One shelter's website just came right out with the grim truth: “The general public is not aware of how doomed black dogs are when they are brought to a pound.”

The more Delaney learned about the numbers of black dogs in shelters, the more determined she grew to make a difference—one black dog at a time. She started by adopting Jake, the overlooked Lab. But Jake would not be the only black dog in Delaney's life.

Her newly acquired insight into the plight of the BBD inspired her to create a website devoted to them. Last November, Delaney launched www.blackpearldogs.com and named her new site “Contrary

RESCUE **R**

to Ordinary: The Black Pearls of the Dog World." Since its inception, the Black Pearl Dogs website has been visited by more than 7,500 people.

"I'm starting to become a middle-person between shelters and rescues, to get their black dogs off death row," says Delaney, whose in-box fills with e-mail from shelters and rescue groups asking her to post pictures on her website of black dogs who were passed up on the way to the Golden Retrievers.

When Amy Chase read about Delaney's Black Pearl site on an Internet message board this spring, she had a big black dog of her own to worry about. Five months earlier, animal control officers had dropped off Mickie, a Newfoundland mix, at the Ohio County Animal Shelter in Rising Sun, Ind., where Chase works. Looking for ways to make Mickie more interesting to those who visited the shelter, Chase highlighted his Newfie heritage, but nothing seemed to work.

To potential adopters, "He was just another big, black, hairy dog," recalls Chase. Mickie was scheduled for euthanasia in May, so Chase contacted Delaney, who in turn posted Mickie's picture on the Black Pearl website. She also cross-posted it on

other adoption sites, including Jen Wold's Gemini Rottweiler Rescue, where Delaney had found Jake. Before long, Mickie was no longer just another black dog, but the focus of three optimistic women and their commitment to finding him a home.

Most black dogs have to rely on shelter staff and volunteers to steer potential adopters their way. And indeed, many shelters take extra steps to make black dogs more adoptable, according to Kate Pullen, director of animal sheltering issues at the



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Humane Society of the United States in Washington, D.C. Teaching the dogs tricks, putting placards on kennels highlighting the dog's personality ("I may just be a black dog, but I know how to balance a biscuit on my nose"), making sure multiple black dogs aren't kenneled next to one other—anything to catch the eye and imagination of potential adopters.

"I've had to turn away many black dogs because I can't fill the place up with them," says Jill Wimmer, shelter manager at PAWS Atlanta, that city's oldest and largest no-kill shelter. "And every one I turned away had a great temperament." Wimmer knows that she can likely adopt out three dogs in the time it takes to find a home for one BBD.

Delaney's advocacy for Mickie eventually paid off when Shonna Crompton of Ada, Minn., went online in April and came across Mickie's forlorn face—stamped URGENT—on Wold's Gemini Rottweiler Rescue site. "I couldn't just let him die," says Crompton.

In May, Delaney, Chase and Wold arranged for a network of volunteers to transport Mickie nearly 500 miles from Rising Sun, Ind., to Madison, Wis. Crompton's husband, Shane, drove Mickie another 400 miles to his new home in northern Minnesota. "His hip bones were

protruding and his belly was sunken," recalls Crompton of her first meeting with Mickie. "But he just sprawled out on the grass like it was the best feeling on the planet."

Right now, Delaney is feeling pretty good herself, and hopes that her website, which is filled with black-dog facts, convinces more people to give a BBD a chance. She works for all the black dogs waiting in shelters and foster homes, and

SHADOW

I want to write my poems like a dog
lives life: muzzle deep in the rot
of flesh and hair found in a far field:
to wallow joyously in the stench
of death—its hard remains worried
until clean and white—and read the shit piles
of life as if they were the *New York Times*
or gateways to enlightenment. Stupid
in my love—all eyes and tongue and tail—
I would head into the path of fate ears pricked,
uncomplaining when its wheel rolls over me.
Just glad to have had this day, this bit of sun
and shadow, some hint of game on the breeze,
a momentary hand resting on my head,

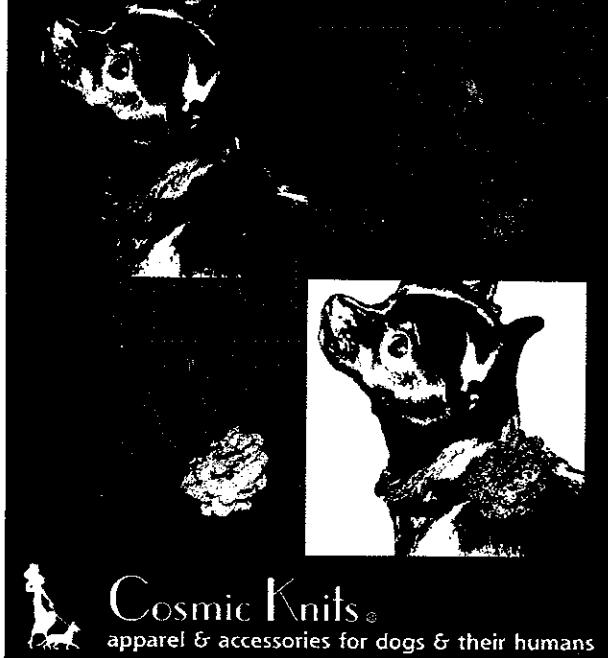
a name to be called.

—Christina Lovin

for the ones who never got a chance to know what it was like to play and be loved, she says. "I mostly just hope it helps people become aware of how overlooked and underadopted these dogs are," says Delaney. "I had one person tell me, 'Thank you for being an advocate for the black dog, because nobody else is.'" **B**

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