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Blind Dog Rescue Alliance gives vision-impaired dogs a second chance

By Robert Moran
Inquirer Staff Writer

His name was Rocky, and he was a real-life underdog.

The 8-week-old Siberian Husky-mix puppy was a stray found in a remote section of western Canada, "with nothing in his belly but worms on rocks," Brier Cadden wrote in a Feb. 7, 2010, e-mail. "No one wanted to touch him because they didn't like what his eyes looked like."

Rocky had an eye condition and was almost blind.

Cadden, now 33, sent the e-mail to the Philadelphia-based Blind Dog Rescue Alliance, which she found by searching Google.

What followed was a remarkable transcontinental journey for the puppy. He was flown from the town of Smithers in northwestern British Columbia to Vancouver, then driven to Seattle. From there, he rode with a truck driver to Wisconsin, where he spent a night. He then spent a week being fostered in Michigan before traveling to Philadelphia to stay with Karen Belfi, president of the alliance. He was eventually adopted by a woman in Somerdale, N.J.

All courtesy of the Blind Dog Rescue Alliance's volunteer network. The once-emaciated puppy is now 95 pounds and has been renamed Uri.

The nonprofit alliance was formed by Belfi in 2009 and has since grown to include 150 volunteers in the United States, a few in Canada, and even one in New Zealand, said Belfi, 38, who is the president.

"I am shocked at how big we got so fast," she said. "We thought we'd rescue a handful of dogs a year. So far we have saved over 160."

On July 1, Toyota announced that it would donate a Highlander Hybrid SUV to the alliance as part of its "100 Cars for Good" program, spotlighting 100 nonprofit groups around the United States.

"They accepted 5,000 applications, so we really didn't think we had a chance," Belfi said. "Then we found out we were one of 500 finalists, and couldn't believe it. But to actually win is just amazing."

Rocky's is just one of many remarkable rescues handled by the alliance. But first, a clarification: Rocky wasn't named for the movie, Cadden said, but because he was eating rocks.

The puppy was renamed by the alliance, which has changing themes for choosing names so the dogs do not wind up being called Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, or Keller. When Rocky arrived, it was a Russian theme, so he was renamed Uri.

"Uri went to see Dr. [Jerome] Glickstein, a [Bucks County] vet who specializes in eye care, and was given drops for his eyes," said Heather Ebersole, 37, who adopted Uri.

"Between the drops and Uri growing, his eyes have cleared and he has no visual impairment at all," she said. "I joke that he faked being blind so that he could get rescued by BDRA. His vision is so good that I have seen him following butterflies in the backyard as he lies in the grass," she said.

"I was so impressed with the way BDRA operated and cared about their dogs that I became a volunteer," Ebersole said. "I have since adopted another dog through them."

The seed for the blind-dog rescues was planted in 1999 when Belfi and the man who is now her husband, Eric Belfi, 41, adopted a shepherd-collie mix that had been born without eyes.

They named him . . . Ray Charles.

Karen Belfi became active in Yahoo groups related to blind dogs. It was on Yahoo that she met Colleen Little, who is now the alliance's vice president.

The support group for blind dogs - there also is one devoted to rescues - has grown from 300 members to more than 5,000.

"There are so many dogs that need help," said Little, 62, who lives in the community of Musquodoboit Harbour, near Halifax, Nova Scotia. "They're fantastic dogs who basically aren't given a chance, and we give them a chance."

Laura Barrett, 39, an alliance board member in Laguna Beach, Calif., said the dogs usually need a little help in the beginning, but they adjust.

"People look at blind dogs and say, 'How sad.' It's not sad," Barrett said.

For veterinary checkups and care, Belfi takes her dogs to Francie Rubin, who has a practice in Rockledge, Montgomery County.

Rubin said she sometimes deals with pet owners who become worried or scared if their dog suddenly becomes blind or begins to lose sight. Owners ask about euthanasia.

"If a client is worried," Rubin said, "I try to reassure them that their dog will really be quite fine."

Finding homes for the dogs is not a problem for the alliance, Belfi said. Transporting the dogs is highly organized; volunteers drive legs of an hour or so, with transfers and check-ins with monitors.

The one struggle, Belfi said, is fund-raising. There is an \$18,000 balance on the nonprofit's credit card. Expenses pile up with medical bills, food, gas, and other supplies.

To help defray some of the costs, the alliance charges an adoption fee of up to \$225. The group sells T-shirts, dog toys, and calendars. There is a fund-raising dinner in September. Almost every weekend, the alliance participates in events in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. To learn more about the nonprofit, go to www.blinddogrescue.com

Belfi's love of animals started when she was a child. Over the years, she and her family have had dogs, cats, guinea pigs, hamsters, and rabbits.

"We always had a little bit of a zoo around," she said.

The Belfis own two dogs and regularly foster dogs that come in, mainly from around the eastern United States but increasingly from the South.

One of their dogs, Pete, a beagle-mix, came from South Carolina. He was wandering on the side of a highway and was initially believed to have been hit by a car because his head was bloodied.

A veterinarian discovered what really happened: He had been shot in the face with buckshot. His eyes had to be removed.

"He was going to be put to sleep if somebody didn't help him," Belfi said.

Now Pete thrives in the Belfi home. He follows voice commands whenever there is an obstacle or steps. But he is not tentative. On a recent walk, Pete was surging forward on his leash, eager to explore around the neighborhood and the nearby campus of Holy Family University.

"Can they be happy? Yeah," Belfi said. "Everyday is happy day for Pete."