

## **Elvis—A Shelter Dog To A Ground Zero Hero**

When I was just eight years old, my beloved dog Pugsley ran away from home. After going from shelter to shelter in search of Pugsley he was located just a few doors down the road. We were so happy to be reunited with him, after just a week of separation. However, it was the eyes of the dogs that I saw in the shelters that stayed with me, long after Pusley's return. Most of those animals were good and loyal pets at one time and through circumstances beyond their control they became part of an overcrowded shelter system. (Statistics say that about 90% of dogs that enter a shelter will never walk out alive.)

Through that experience, my mother and I established a nonprofit organization called Rawhide Rescue in New Jersey. Together with other families we fostered dogs that would have otherwise been euthanized. Through Petfinder.com we wrote stories about "our dogs," and placed them in loving and forever homes.

One Saturday in April, when I was eleven years old, my mom and I went to the animal shelter, as we did most every weekend. During our trips to the shelter, we would meet potential foster dogs for Rawhide Rescue foster homes. Our trips to the shelters were sad, for we could only take one dog home at a time and they all looked so sad and only needed another chance. The conditions at the shelters were horrid for the dogs were forced to live in cages side by side with no socialization. They were forced to do everything in these little cages and rarely got a chance to run free and play. On this day, we visited a shelter in New York City that was facing severe overcrowding. As I walked into the dog area, I noticed one run with a hand written sign that said, "Hyper-Active." Inside the cage I saw a beautiful chocolate lab who could not sit still for even a second. His name was Elvis.

I knew that Elvis did not stand a chance of adoption, as New York City was no place for a "hyperactive" dog. I begged my mother to let us take Elvis home that day, knowing we were his only hope. With a lot of hesitation, my mother gave into my pleading. I was elated that Elvis would come home to us, and we would find him his "forever" home, in a home with plenty of room for Elvis to run and play.

Once home, we realized that Elvis's shelter nickname of "hyper" was well deserved! He ran in circles around us in the back yard, without ever getting tired. We had our neighbor, a marathon runner, take him out for long runs, and still nothing could slow Elvis down. Thankfully, Elvis was a sweet dog, but with all of his energy, he was like a bull in a china shop. We soon realized that Elvis was not cut out to be anyone's family pet. My mother suggested that we may have to return Elvis to the shelter, as we just could not harness his energy. This was not an option; I needed to find a home for Elvis, and fast. I realized that Elvis needed a job to do, and started to do some research.

I called police and fire departments throughout New Jersey, in the hopes that they needed a dog like Elvis. After many calls and e-mails, I learned that the Sheriff's Department in Monmouth County, New Jersey had a large K-9 program. With a little

luck, I was able to speak to the chief canine trainer and told him all about Elvis. I know that he was a little bit skeptical, and so I had my mother speak with him too. The trainer decided to come to our home to meet Elvis in person. After all, he got “these types of phone calls” all the time, but finding a dog cut out for the Sheriff’s office K-9 department was like finding a needle in a haystack, and there never seemed to be enough dogs with the right temperament.

Once at our house, the trainer knew just how to touch, speak and control our Elvis. He had some special toys for Elvis that he threw in our backyard. When he took a toy away from Elvis, he wanted to make sure that Elvis would not growl or bite. Elvis performed perfectly, proving that his temperament and energy level was perfect for the K-9 program.

After 45 minutes the police officer and Elvis got into the police van and left our home. Elvis would begin his intensive training to become a search and rescue dog the following day. And, while I would miss Elvis, I knew it was exactly the kind of life for him.

After a few months, we learned that Elvis passed all of his tests with flying colors and was placed at the New Jersey Meadowlands as a drug-sniffing dog. Elvis patrolled the Meadowlands and sniffed backpacks, purses and people to assure no drugs or bombs entered the stadium. What a great feeling to know how far Elvis had come. Back in April, he was close to being euthanized and now he was part of New Jersey’s most elite law enforcement department.

And, months later I learned that on September 11, 2001 Elvis was needed at Ground Zero to help others search for survivors after the attack on the World Trade Center. The following month, Mayer Giuliani personally gave Elvis a medal of commendation for his bravery and hard work.

It is amazing how far Elvis has come, from being just another dog in an overcrowded shelter system to a hero saving lives. To even think that Elvis could have been euthanized is heart breaking for he has helped to enhance the lives of so many. In the shelter he was not even given the time of day that he needed to prove himself. Shelters are not the place for any dog, for they are scary, overwhelming, and stressful places for animals and it is only after they are taken out of that environment that people are able to see what amazing dogs they can be. Elvis is a perfect example of this.

I was so proud of that hyperactive dog from New York City. From this I learned how we can all have such a big impact on the lives of others, by the decisions we make every day. Through Elvis I was able to discover what I truly wanted to do, which is dedicated to the homeless animals that only need a second chance and hopefully by pursuing a career in working with animals I can achieve this. I am hopeful that through my collegiate I can make a difference and help other dogs just like Elvis save peoples lives, for it is not only about the animals, but also the difference they make in the peoples life. It is that connection that has brought me to be so interested in an animal science

major. I hope to have the opportunity to share my experiences with others and then encourage them to see that when we follow our dreams, it can make the world a better place for everyone. I am thankful for Elvis, and all that he added to my life.