



How Rescuing a Shelter Dog Helped to Heal My Grieving Heart

Many of us rescue animals not only because we value them, but also because deep down we're trying to heal the lost, abandoned, and vulnerable parts of ourselves.

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The kennel at the animal shelter was absolutely packed. It seemed like there were hundreds of dogs in there, as many as five or six to a run, their voices clamoring in a cacophony of barking. I hadn't been to a shelter in many years, but when my rescue friends, Jennifer and Nick from Angels Among Us Pet Rescue, invited me to visit one of Atlanta's inner-city animal shelters and help them possibly rescue a couple of dogs, I jumped at the chance.

But when we first walked into the place, I have to admit it took me a few minutes to get my emotions under control. The sight of so many Pit Bull-type dogs, whining, crying, and jumping up against the chain-link barriers, staring at me with pleading eyes, was absolutely overwhelming and heart wrenching. I wished I could save every one of them, while silently despising the irresponsible humans who had put them there.

I was walking down the last aisle of runs when I spotted her — a large, gangly young dog with a Mastiff (<http://www.dogster.com/dog-breeds/Mastiff/>)-like head, smooth red coat, and sweet, wrinkly face. Lying there, she looked like a sphinx, gazing about her with a solemn, confused expression, as if fighting to maintain her composure in such frenetic, undignified surroundings. I'm not sure if it was her dark, soulful eyes, those big paws, or that wrinkly brow that got me, but I was immediately drawn to her.



Mandy when I first saw her at the shelter. She had been found as a stray. (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

As I approached the run, her kennelmate, a blue Pit Bull, rushed the fence, tail whipping back and forth at top speed in anticipation. Feeling sorry for the poor blue girl, I crouched down and pressed my hand against the chain link so she could sniff and lick my skin. Yet all the while my gaze was fixed on the red girl, who hadn't moved and was watching me, as if politely waiting her turn. When I called to her, she jumped up, a flicker of hope alighting in her eyes, but the blue Pit became territorial and immediately blocked her path. It was obvious that the red girl was the submissive dog in the run, the way she hung back with her head low and eyes averted, obviously afraid to get too close for fear of reprisal from her dominant kennelmate.

"Hey, look at this dog!" I called over to Jenn, who'd been busy checking out a Shih Tzu (http://www.dogster.com/dog-breeds/Shih_Tzu) she was planning to pull. "She's so special."

Like me, Jennifer's face was tight with emotion. No matter how frequently a rescuer pulls from high-kill shelters, I don't think they ever get used to the sight of so many homeless dogs in such terrible circumstances through no fault of their own. Almost two million canines lose their lives in U.S. shelters every year because of over-breeding and human irresponsibility, problems that don't seem to be going away, especially here in the South.



Mandy and the blue Pittie. The very defeated dog in the back didn't even bother to get out of his bed while we were there. (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

"Can we take her?" I asked beseechingly, watching Jennifer's face as she gazed at the red girl, who was pacing back and forth behind the blue Pit, her expressive face full of longing. Jenn explained that we'd have to get a foster home lined up first, as our rescue already had more than 800 animals in its system and boarding yet another dog wasn't an affordable option. Plus, large dogs were much harder to place in foster homes, and most of our volunteers were already overwhelmed with animals. Yet I could tell from Jenn's face that she also saw something very special in this wrinkly faced red dog.

Crouching down next to me, Jenn coaxed the blue Pit to one side of the run and kept her distracted so the red girl could finally get to me. As I poked my fingers through the fence, stroked her soft fur, and felt her warm tongue bathe my hand, I could barely contain my emotions. I had to get her out of here, but there was no way I could foster her myself, as my two German Shepherds (http://www.dogster.com/dog-breeds/German_Shepherd) disliked other dogs and would surely do her harm.

Still, I felt destined to save this girl. After all, I had already named her Mandy after my dear friend Amanda, who had died suddenly just five days earlier from an accidental drug overdose. In fact, that day happened to be Amanda's 44th birthday, and though I was still in shock, I knew I would find catharsis in rescuing this dog in her honor.

Nick walked over to us, and we gazed up at him with sad faces. He took one look at the newly named Mandy and suggested we take pictures and video of her, then post them on the Angels Among Us Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/angelsrescue>). Maybe by some miracle, a volunteer would take her in. Otherwise, we had no choice but to leave her to an uncertain future. With that, Nick let himself into the run, looped a leash over Mandy's head, and pulled her to freedom.



Mandy smiles for the camera out in the shelter play yard. How could anyone resist that face? (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

The moment we let her loose in the play yard, it was like someone had flipped a switch. The once-seedate, solemn-faced dog immediately transformed into a happy, playful puppy, diving for the nearest squeaky toy and running around with it in her mouth. She was sweet, affectionate, beautiful, and adorable, and when other dogs walked by it was obvious she just wanted to interact and play with them. Jenn, Nick, and I looked at each other and practically cried out in unison, "What an awesome dog!"

After spending a little time petting and playing with the bouncy pup, we captured me on camera cuddling Mandy while pleading with our foster network to take her on. Though it was hard to return her to her run and even more agonizing to leave her there, we had done what we could and would leave it up to one of our kindhearted foster volunteers to jump in and do the rest. As I followed Jenn and Nick toward the door, I couldn't help but look over my shoulder, just in time to see Mandy put her paws up on the side of the run and watch me walk away.



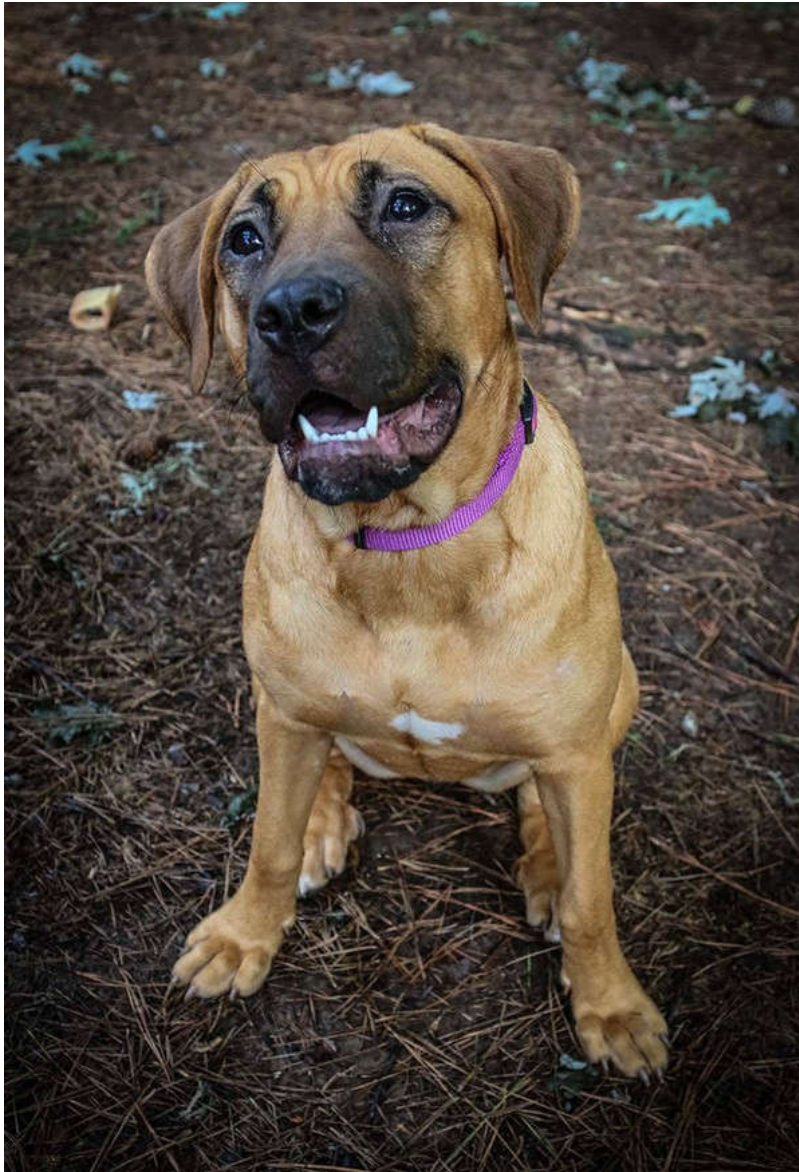
Mandy's heartbroken face before we left her at the shelter. I vowed right then and there that I would get her out. (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

That night, I lay awake mulling over the events of the day like a video on an endless loop. I couldn't stop thinking about Mandy, the way she'd looked at me with those mournful eyes as she watched me walk out the door. Though she had become special to me, wasn't she just one of thousands of shelter dogs who find themselves in the same tragic predicament every day in this country? Thinking about her, and all of the other dogs like her, I felt tears begin to flow. I wondered if perhaps I might be experiencing some displaced grief for Mandy's namesake, whose death still seemed incomprehensible to me. But whether I was crying over Mandy the canine or Mandy the human, I became inspired to do something I hadn't done in years — pray.

The next day found me in yoga class, trying to clear my mind and focus my breathing as I moved and sweated from pose to pose. Yet despite the efforts to quiet my brain, my thoughts kept returning to Mandy, hoping one of our foster volunteers had been swayed by her photos and video. So when I got to my car, checked my phone, and heard Jennifer's and Nick's excited voices on my voicemail, my heart leapt. A longtime foster volunteer, an amazing woman named Chrissy, had agreed to take Mandy. She would

be released from the shelter that afternoon.

I felt like a crazy person, crying hysterically one moment and laughing uncontrollably the next as I silently thanked Amanda, wherever she was, imagining she'd somehow had a hand in rescuing this sweet dog. The fact that Angels Among Us was so full and yet Mandy had found a foster home so quickly was indeed nothing short of a miracle.



Mandy safe and sound in her foster home one week after her rescue. Don't you love that precious smile? (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

People who foster animals are indeed their own breed of kindhearted human. They're the kind of selfless individuals who think nothing of opening their homes and hearts to homeless creature after homeless creature, happy to provide them with food, shelter, care, and love for as long as it takes to find them their forever homes. Whether caring for the sickly, rehabilitating the abused, or comforting the neglected, foster volunteers are a crucial part of any successful rescue organization and an absolutely vital component in helping homeless pets achieve the lives they were always meant to live — that of beloved companions.

Chrissy is such a special individual. Despite the fact that Mandy had no manners when she arrived in her home — along with tons of puppy energy and naughty, destructive tendencies — Chrissy's patient, calm energy, and loving attention did wonders for the wayward 9-month-old pup, who thrived in her care for almost three months before moving to another foster home with a family who is considering adopting her.

Whenever I had a chance to visit her at Chrissy's, it was obvious how secure, loved, and happy Mandy felt with her foster mom and canine foster brothers and sisters. And although part of me is envious that I didn't get the chance to foster Mandy myself or develop the kind of special bond she had with Chrissy, I'm so grateful that such a wonderful person ended up being the ideal post-shelter guardian for her.



Chrissy and Mandy at a recent Angels Among Us adoption event. (Photo by Lisa Plummer Savas)

I wasn't able to save Amanda. I wasn't there to drag her to an AA meeting, sit with her while she went through withdrawals, or talk her out of doing something self-destructive. I probably wouldn't have been able to anyway — Amanda lived by her own rules and did what she wanted to do when she felt like doing it. While her life and death were a tragedy, she lived and died on her own terms. Maybe that's why saving canine Mandy and helping to give her a second chance at life has meant so much to me. And while rescuing her may not be enough to stop the pain of losing my soul sister, it has gotten me further along the road to healing and finally accepting her loss.

I think ultimately some of us rescue animals not only because we value them as beings and believe they deserve to be safe, happy, and cherished, but also because deep down we're trying to save and heal those lost, abandoned, and vulnerable parts of ourselves. I know that's certainly true for me. No, I didn't change the world by helping to save one dog, but for that one dog, for Mandy, I'm pretty sure the world has changed forever. And I know Amanda would be so proud.



Mandy and me, a month after her rescue. Though I'm sad she won't be my dog, I'm so thrilled I was able to help her find a second chance at life. (Photo by Chris Savas)