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Unwanted Labradors Get 2nd Chance at Love Through Local Group

Rescuers Find Homes for No. 1 Breed in U.S.



Safe Harbor Lab Rescue co-founders Leslie Brown, left, and Lauren Immel show their affection for three dogs helped by the rescue group. The two women founded the group in May 2002 out of their love for people-friendly Labrador retrievers and Lab mixes. Sometimes even a lovable Labrador retriever needs a safe harbor, a rescuer.

Luckily, for many, that is available.

Safe Harbor Lab Rescue was born in May 2002 out of the love that two local women have for animals, and especially their affinity for people-friendly Labradors. Now, they find homes for about a dozen stray, abandoned and surrendered Labs - many with medical problems - each month.

They have even found places for a couple of blind Labradors. They have spent thousands of dollars of donated money to mend some dogs with serious medical conditions - such as knee and hip problems, immune disorders, injuries from car accidents - to make them more adoptable.

Leslie Brown and Lauren Immel were hooked up by leaders of another rescue group, the Golden Retrievers Rescue of the Rockies, who filled them with the notion that unwanted Labs showing up in shelters needed a champion, too.

Now, the women refer to that group as their "furry godmothers."

In May 2002, Brown and Immel retrieved nine Labs - including a female with a litter of puppies - from the Weld County Humane Society. They placed them all within a few weeks, and they've been providing safe harbors for wayward Labs ever since.

Their second rescue was a blind Lab named Abbie from the Denver Municipal Animal Shelter.

To get Safe Harbor up and running, Brown retired from her job with the state and Immel took a year off from gainful employment. "We have been blessed with a team of dedicated, loyal and hard-working volunteers, including a network of foster homes, all who came to us gradually over the last year and a half and have stuck with us through thick and thin," said Brown, who now works part time for Arvada West Veterinary Hospital.

The nonprofit group has about 30 volunteers. All of them work out of their own homes. The organization's address is a post-office box in Golden and a website.

Safe Harbor strives to provide care and attention to homeless Labs and Lab mixes, and to make them not only more adoptable but to help make those adoptions stick by matching up Lab personalities with human expectations, said Immel.

The group provides medical care for dogs that were abandoned because of medical problems but have a good prognosis after treatment, she said.

Labrador retrievers are the most popular canine pets in America, Simpson said. But their great numbers mean more turn up in need, too. Immel, who now works full time for the Alameda East Veterinary Hospital, fears that Labs have become synonymous with the American dream.

"We finish college, get married, get a Lab puppy, then banish the dog to the backyard or the pound once the first baby comes along," Immel said.

"So many of our applicants want a young, mellow Lab. Well, that's like asking for a pocket-sized Great Dane," she said. Labs tend to be full of energy, she said.

"It seems that we have woven into the American dream the right to have a Lab or golden retriever puppy along with the house in the suburbs. The demand for puppies keeps breeders - and ultimately rescues and shelters - in business," Immel said.

Safe Harbor is left finding new families for dogs who have lost their homes. They are good at it.

After volunteers evaluate a Lab for its potential for success in a new home, even if it requires some work first, they rescue it from a shelter. The dog then goes to a foster home for two or three

weeks, while the volunteers learn more about it and find just the right family from among its online applicants. The group has had a lot of success. "We place every single one," Brown said. "I can't think of any we haven't placed. We place them all." Their aim is to put them in a "forever" home.

The work done by the volunteers at Safe Harbor isn't unique.

The All Breed Rescue Network maintains a breed rescue referral list of about 150 reliable breed rescues. They help educate potential pet owners and find them the right pet. The list is available on All Breed's website - www.allbreedrescuenetwork.com. Its hotline number is 303-989-7808.

If you're interested in making a donation to help Labs in need, or if you want to adopt, visit www.safeharborlabrescue.org or call 303-464-7777.