

the modern dog culture magazine

BARK

Dog is my co-pilot

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DOGS!

Wolf, Myth, Hero & Friend

Cuba

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GREEN IDEAS

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Issue



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CONTRIBUTORS



Heather Bohm-Tallman (photographs, p. 30) is a freelance photojournalist, who specializes in candid dog portraiture. She lives in Salem, Massachusetts, with her husband, Chad, and with her adopted dogs, Lily, Tanner and Taco.

Jeannette Cooperman (Dog Friendships, p. 23) is a journalist who holds a doctorate in American studies and has won numerous national awards for her reporting on social and cultural issues. She and her husband live in St. Louis with their best friend, a standard Poodle named Sophie.

Twig Mowatt (Satos, p. 30) is head of communications for TIAX, a Cambridge, Massachusetts-based technology consulting and development company. She also was a

journalist for 10 years, covering business in Miami for a Time-Warner paper and covering the drug war in Colombia for the Associated Press and *The New York Times*.

Blaire Van Valkenburgh, Ph.D. (Dogs, p. 42) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Organismic Biology, Ecology, and Evolution at UCLA. Her research interests are the morphology and behavior of carnivores, past and present. She is best known for her work on the predatory behavior of saber-tooth cats, but she is also an expert on the evolutionary history of the dog family Canidae. She has published over 50 items in journals, textbooks and popular books, and has appeared in several television documentaries.

Robert K. Wayne, Ph.D. (Dogs, p. 42) is a world-renowned researcher whose focus on dogs began with his Ph.D. work, which involved study of skeletal diversity in domestic dogs and wild canids. This research established the role of neoteny (juvenilization) in the development of dog breeds and showed how dogs differed from their wild brethren. He is now a professor in UCLA's Department of Organismic Biology, Ecology, and Evolution.

AS A PUPPY, JOAN OF ARC, a small black and furry mix of many breeds, must have briefly belonged to someone in San Juan, Puerto Rico—this much can be guessed from the rope that was tied around her neck, probably as a makeshift collar and leash. But, as so often happens on this island, the puppy was eventually turned out into the street. From that point on, the details of Joan's life are sketchy. What's clear is that she began to grow, which made the rope

around her neck tighten and become embedded in her tissue. An infection ensued—the raw pockets on her neck even filled with worms—and one day someone tried to drive away this smelly, diseased and undoubtedly starving dog by dousing her with gasoline. Mercifully, no one lit a match, but the gas caused horrendous chemical burns. Today, Joan, now known as Gwen, lives the good life in Wakefield, New Hampshire, with a devoted owner, Angela Karedes, who is a veterinary technician. Gwen has a canine brother whom she adores, plenty of food, her own bed and the run of the house. The only visible scars from her early trauma are a few bald spots on her neck and her soulful eyes. "Everyone notices them," says Karedes. "She just melts you." ★ This amazing transition from life on the streets to life in the suburbs is just one of many—nearly 10,000 in fact—success stories made possible by the San Juan-based Save-a-Sato Foundation. (*Sato* means "mixed street dog" in Puerto Rican slang.) The organization, founded in 1996, is dedicated to improving the lives of satos. It does this by taking them off the streets, healing them emotionally and physically, and then flying them to a network of no-kill shelters, foster homes and breed rescue groups throughout the United States (Connecticut, Florida, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Texas and Wisconsin are some of the participating states), where they are adopted into good homes. ★ Like many areas

outside the heart of Western influence, Puerto Rico displays a mix of cultural and economic barriers to spaying and neutering animals that results in literally millions of unwanted dogs and cats left to battle starvation, disease and abuse on the streets. "The government doesn't do anything to help the situation, and the rampant number of strays affects everything from tourism to sanitation," says Chantal Robles, Save-a-Sato co-founder. "And people here think of the local shelters as places where




second chance

satos

by Twig Mowatt • Photography by Heather Bohm-Tallman



save a rescue



One American shelter has taken in over 2,000 Puerto Rican dogs and 100 cats since signing up with the program in 1999.

your animal is put to sleep. So, why take an unwanted dog there and have it destroyed if it could survive on the street? People just let their dogs loose to fend for themselves."

Robles' outrage had translated into action long before Save-a-Sato came into being. She fed groups of strays every day for years, taking the injured and sick animals to a local veterinary clinic. It was at that clinic that she met Karen Fehrenbach, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas, who was working in San Juan at the time. Fehrenbach was getting vaccines for a litter of puppies who had been put in a box and thrown out the window of a car. The next day she planned to fly them back to her vet in Little Rock, where they would be put up for adoption. Robles, who works for a leading air carrier, gave Fehrenbach a buddy pass to make the trip—and Save-a-Sato was born.

Today the non-profit is run by 10 to 15 members (defined as someone who rescues at least five dogs a month) in San Juan, along with a U.S. volunteer network that includes a webmaster (www.saveasato.org) and people who respond to e-mail. Most weeks, the staff manages to send about 30 dogs (and some cats, though that isn't the focus) off the island on commercial flights. It used to be easy and inexpensive to ship the animals as unaccompanied cargo, but stricter regulations post-9/11 now require every kennel to be assigned to a passenger as

-a-sato is mission across border



checked baggage. Through word-of-mouth and pleas on the website, the foundation usually recruits sympathetic island visitors to be escorts. But if no one is available, they have to pay someone to accompany the satos.

And that's not easy for a non-profit that functions on a shoestring budget. Average monthly donations don't begin to cover the costs of so many rescues (even with a local vet offering deep discounts on medical services); many volunteers make up the shortfall by digging into their own pockets. The group is currently embarking on a major fundraising initiative to refurbish a donated building into a spacious and well-equipped way station for animals en route to U.S. shelters. The structure will replace the current makeshift, but functional, mega-foster home, which houses 60 to 70 dogs at a time. As the only paid staff member, Gloria Marti is the resident foster mother, doing everything from cleaning cages to conducting heartworm checks and treating pneumonia. The only time she leaves the animals is at night; she turns the radio to a classical music station to lull them to sleep while she's gone.

Keeping the foster home overflowing with satos is dishearteningly easy. Most volunteers don't go anywhere without a full range of dog rescue equipment (humane traps, leashes, food, medicines) so they can make pick-ups wherever their daily business takes them. They also search the prime sato

magnets, such as construction sites, garbage dumps, housing projects and beaches. The volunteers have created an enviable network of sato spotters, such as security guards and night watchmen, now trained to alert the crew to new stray sightings. This network even extends to the homeless, who share their limited food scraps with the dogs they find while awaiting rescue help. For instance, Felipe was searching for aluminum cans at an illegal dump site when he found Coralina, a Wire-Haired Terrier mix, whom he took under his wing. Coralina, now called Heidi, has moved to Somerville, Massachusetts, to live with Ben and Ali Sprecher.

As in the case of Coralina, most rescues are straightforward—these dogs are hungry and will approach a hand that offers food. But sometimes, the satos are so traumatized from earlier injury or abuse that a rescue can take months. That's because the volunteers refuse to force a rescue in case the resulting trauma makes the dog less trusting of people and therefore less adoptable.

This patient process ensures that nearly every sato exemplifies the same unique temperament, built around an enduring appreciation for a second chance. "Satos are really smart, very well-behaved, quiet, obedient and agile," says Leigh Grady, director at Sterling Animal Shelter in Sterling, Massachusetts. "They dance on their back legs and are very curious and do



extremely well with other animals." She should know. Sterling has taken in more than 2,000 Puerto Rican dogs and 100 cats since signing up with the program in 1999. Still, with all these adoptions, a few stand out—particularly those in which truly desperate dogs ended up in extraordinary homes. Lucy is a good example. The homely Basset arrived at Sterling with fleas, mange, internal infections and nipples so distended from nursing multiple litters that they nearly dragged the floor. Lucy ultimately died of cancer, but not before enjoying 15 months of bliss with a loving owner who asked Grady to be there when Lucy was finally put to sleep.

Grady heard about the program through the Northeast Animal Shelter in Salem, Massachusetts, which began taking in satos eight years ago. The early days with the program were hard—not because the satos were difficult to place, but because the shelter generated a certain amount of skepticism over its decision to take in non-local animals. To many residents, that implied that local dogs were being turned away. But that's never been the case. The Northeast region in general has very few small dogs available for adoption and virtually no puppies, thanks to effective spay and neuter

campaigns. Satos fill these two important voids, which might otherwise send people into pet shops—anathema to the shelter community.

"People have definitely come around [on the issue] because they understand the situation now and see how successful the satos are. We get a lot of requests for Puerto Rican dogs," says Julie Potter, director of the Northeast Animal Shelter. "In fact, of all the types of dogs we take in, we hear more from people who adopt satos than from any other source." ❶

*a
fresh
start*