

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE ...[©]

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... a few minutes of your time each day? Can you share the warmth of your home, a little bit of food twice a day, or a small slice of your easy chair? Ever think about a companion for those evening walks? Is there enough love in your life that you have a just a little bit left over for someone else?

No, this isn't some Internet dating service. What I'm referring to is becoming a foster home for an all-breed or breed-specific rescue. Basically, a foster home that provides love and shelter for a dog or a cat until an appropriate home can be found ... a new home that has been screened carefully and is a good match for the animal.

Besides funding, the greatest need most rescues have is for qualified foster homes. Homes that can take in and care for an animal that's been picked up as a stray, relinquished by an owner, or pulled from a shelter as its last days were ticking down. People who are willing to care for, train and offer shelter despite knowing the animal will eventually go live with someone else.

Before you jump in with both feet, however, you need to do some research regarding the rescue you are interested in working with. All rescues are not created equal and you need to sort through them carefully. Having a 501(c)(3) designation does *not* mean the rescue in question is either ethical or reputable. All it means is they have done the paperwork dance and received the desired IRS status. Hallmarks of reputable, ethical rescues are:

- There is an intake screening process;
- Dogs are fostered until all medical and behavioral needs have been met;
- Dogs are *not* placed on a first come/first served basis ... they are placed in the home that best suits a dog's particular needs;
- The prospective family must undergo a screening process (most require an application, vet/personal reference checks and, finally, a home check);
- *No* animal is placed without having been spayed or neutered – *no exceptions!* Puppies are kept until they are old enough to be altered.
- If a breed-specific rescue, the coordinators are experienced in the particular breed. Coordinators may also be involved with the breed outside of rescue as well, i.e., conformation, agility, obedience or working trials, etc.
- Coordinators work closely with the foster families to see the dog's medical needs are met (at the rescue's expense) and any behavioral issues are promptly addressed.

Sound interesting? If so, then you need to ask yourself the following questions (and provide honest answers):

- Do I have enough time to devote to another animal, which may include getting him/her to vet appointments, grooming needs, working with training issues and providing adequate exercise and socialization?
- Do I have experience with a particular breed that may be of benefit?
- Will the other animals in my household be accepting of another dog/cat?
- Is household funding sufficient that I can provide a good quality food for the dog/cat. (Because of lack of funding many rescues will ask that you provide food for the foster).
- When the time comes, can I send this dog/cat off to their new home?

That last item is probably the most difficult. With our organization, Apsos are fostered in-home a minimum of six weeks. During that time, a bond is formed as we go about caring for them on a daily basis, integrating them into the household routine, and working on any issues they may have be it medical or behavioral. We train, we play, we groom, we socialize, we clean up messes, we're up late with sick dogs, we fret, we write bios on each dog, we worry, we rejoice in each step forward – and we watch the dog emerge as an individual with enough quirks to rival the human species. Then, one day, the perfect home comes along and dog is ready to begin a new chapter. And, sometimes, that's when we finally admit to ourselves that dog already had the perfect home – here, with us. It is at that particular moment we take a deep breath (or two) and call to mind the “big picture.” That another dog will soon have need of a second chance ... and it is only by placing *this* one that we will have room for the *next* one. Some fosters are easier to let go than others ... and some never “leave” despite living in a different home.

If you think you're up for the challenge – or would at least like to find out more about becoming a foster home – do a quick Google on all-breed or breed-specific rescues (be sure to include the state). Other resources include PetFinder.com, which has a shelter/rescue listing by state/breed; and parent breed clubs with the American Kennel Club (AKC).

You'll never be the same after having stood outside at 2:00 a.m. on a star lit night in a ratty bathrobe telling a newly-arrived foster dog to “go potty” ... or after receiving a letter from an adoptive family saying how wonderful “dog” is and they can't imagine their life without him.