

ADOPTING AND

BY DIDO PANAGIOTOPOULOS

Living with a Rescue

The Pana Pack consists of L-R – Dido, Dini (on lap), Gumby, Cyclops, Jumpies and Nick Panagiotopoulos

Thinking of adopting a rescue/shelter dog? Yay! This may be one of the best and most fulfilling deeds you can do... provided that you do it with open eyes, an open heart and an open mind, and realise that providing a "Forever Home" is a commitment and responsibility to the rescue dog, for the rest of his life!

It is naive to walk into a shelter and adopt the first dog that tugs at your heartstrings or appeals to you in some emotional way. Pity and love at first sight are often irrational and impulsive, and you may not get the best pet to fit your pack, your lifestyle or your home. Sadly, so many shelter or rescue dogs are returned to shelters

or rehomed because people make emotional decisions which they then live to regret when the adopted dog does not adapt to his new family and living conditions. It is short-sighted to believe that your newly adopted dog will just settle in, adapt, appreciate and be eternally grateful for his/her new home and family pack. Change (ANY change, good or bad) is stressful and fraught with new challenges. Also, your new BFF (big furry friend) is likely to come with his own baggage and issues. It would probably be in everyone's best interests if you got an animal behaviourist to evaluate your family pack and then come with you to the shelter to adopt the best "fit" for your family. Many behaviourists

would do this at a vastly reduced fee (and some do it for free), knowing that you are adopting a shelter or rescue dog.

Making the right choice

Firstly, I recommend you consider what the best fit for your family would be in terms of age, size, breed (or breed mix), and energy level for your family. Are you a young, energetic family who enjoy the outdoors, or are you a mellow, laid-back indoor family who like nothing better than wobbling on the couch in front of the TV? What is your experience with dogs and your expectations of them – will you exercise, stimulate and train the dog, or do you want a mellow, low-energy older dog that would prefer to lie in the sunshine? Is your home and garden dog-friendly, both in terms of providing a safe living environment (the sort of things the animal welfare organisation will check when doing the home visit for approval) and in terms of how welcoming, accepting and tolerant you are? Your expectations need to match the dog, so don't get a puppy or feral rescue if you expect a house-trained animal. Your boundaries and limitations may not be a part of the behavioural repertoire of your newly adopted dog and you will need to teach him "house rules" with compassion and understanding. A dog that has never had toys may find your shoes irresistible. A dog that has grown up on the streets may decide that digging up your sprinkler system is his new calling. A high-energy, water-loving dog may decide that your Kreepy Krauly has to be removed and

Adopting a shelter dog is one of the most fulfilling things you can do

killed (repeatedly), whilst an animal who has had to forage and hunt for food may consider your beloved parrot fair game! Do some research on dog breeds and arrive at a rescue shelter with some idea of what you are (and what you aren't) looking for.

Know your history

Secondly, when you get to the shelter, apart from looking at just the age, breed, gender and energy levels of the dog, try to find out HIS STORY. The history of the dog would include such things as WHY he is in the shelter. Was he abandoned (and why), abused, neglected, a stray? Was he confiscated or handed over? How long has he been living at the shelter and how has he fitted in with the other animals? How well socialised is he with other dogs (is there a preference for gender?), puppies, cats, birds, and people (adults and children)? All these things will give you clues about the personality and baggage/issues of the dog. An abused dog may be fearful, aggressive or reactive. A neglected dog may either be withdrawn or very independent. A dog that was confiscated because of dog fighting will be very different from a family pet that was handed in because the owner had died or the family emigrated.

Obviously, the behavioural issues of an older dog would be more entrenched than that of a puppy. That being said, new research is being conducted into hand-reared (bottle-fed) pups that seem to come with a unique set of issues and challenges. Depending on the shelter, conditions in the shelter, and the amount of time the dog has lived there (for example: overcrowding or lack of human one-on-one interaction, lack of stimulation and exercise), the dog may have varying degrees of kennel

stress, which may also influence his behaviour and how he adapts to a new home environment. Such dogs may have developed maladaptive habits and chew at themselves excessively, or have become food aggressive or possessive over resources, or bury things...

The introduction...

Thirdly, when you take your newly adopted dog home, introducing him to the pack will be of paramount importance. You will need to introduce the dogs in a neutral territory, rather than on your property, and make sure that you remain calm and assertive (in control). Preferably, have someone to help you walk your dogs and introduce the dogs on the move, walking them side by side rather than a head-on confrontation which could cause a stand-off. Keep moving to get rid of tension (and energy) and use treats to provide rewards. Once things are relaxed, allow the dogs to sniff each other and become more familiar, but make sure you remain in control and ready to separate them if there are any signs of anxiety or aggression. Be patient and remain calm!

There are many valuable resources available, including an article, *Thinking about giving a Shelter dog a home?*, under "S" in the Dog Stuff section on the Friends of a Dog website, which will give you free advice about anything and everything you may want to know about your dog (www.friendsofthedog.co.za).

Changing a life

Please remember that when you adopt, you should expect to pay an adoption fee. This fee helps to recover some of the costs the organisation had to cover, such as inoculations/vaccinations, pest control (deworming, tick and flea

treatments), sterilising (spaying or neutering), and microchipping. You will need to fill in adoption forms and be subject to the adoption agency's terms and conditions. You'll need to disclose personal information, including your contact information and the contact details for your vet (the agency may check that your other pets' vaccinations and deworming schedule are up to date). The terms and conditions would include things like your agreement to ensure a puppy is brought back to the organisation (or taken to your own vet) to be sterilised once they are old enough. You will also be subject to a home check to evaluate your home and family's suitability. The animal welfare organisation concerned needs to know that the dog is going into a safe, secure, loving home and family. They will check for things such as secure fencing or walls around the property, a fenced-off swimming pool, where the new dog will spend its time and its sleeping arrangements, and what other pets are on the property (and what state they are in, physically and emotionally).

Finally, it may be worth your while to consider fostering a rescue before permanently adopting one. The rewards are as great and you help to rehabilitate and rehome a rescue/shelter dog, thus becoming a halfway house where the rescue dog learns house rules and manners, and becomes socialised and re-integrated into a family situation (as opposed to living in a shelter or kennels). Many of the best adoptive parents I know are actually Foster Failures, meaning that the little foster fur baby crawled so deeply into their hearts, they just couldn't let him go to a new home! Fostering is a wonderful way of getting involved in animal rescue and rehabilitation. 🐾

ADOPTING *Dini*

BY DIDO PANAGIOTOPOULOS

Dini (as in Houdini, since he could get out of anywhere!) was first noticed living under a grandstand at a school. He was there for a few months, presumably living off titbits from the kids. He was finally trapped and rescued and went into a temporary foster home where he was hyperactive and kept making a dash for freedom until he was put into kennels for his own safety. To cut a long story short, it was heartbreaking to see this incredibly high energy little guy "incarcerated" in what felt to him like jail after being feral and free. I thought I would try and foster him and teach him some manners and house rules, socialise him and make him sociably acceptable... in an attempt to make him home-able. Little did I know what I was taking on!

Apart from being hyperactive, Dini was both anti-social and independent. He was reactive (fearful and aggressive) towards dogs and people, and was so used to his own company that he could happily entertain himself and didn't initially seek out companionship.

The big clean-up

The first and most pressing issue was to get him shorn as he was matted and full of blackjacks. That first cut was a complete nightmare, but luckily I was blessed to have a friend who's a groomer, so Indy came to our home to do this. The vet (who couldn't touch Dini because he tried to bite him) gave me ACP (a pre-med anaesthetic) to administer before the grooming. I subsequently discovered that this was cruel as it stills the central nervous system but does nothing to still the mind. Dini literally fought for his life, drugs and all, during this marathon grooming session, and we were all absolutely exhausted by the end of it!

Dealing with hang-ups and issues

Dini was definitely not a dog that I would have chosen. He had far too many hang-ups and issues, I felt very out of my depth and even my husband said that I couldn't "fix" this one. Perhaps I was the best person for Dini simply because I saw him more as a rehabilitation project than as a permanent resident. Rather than spoil him and lavish



My story of fostering and then adopting a formerly feral dog



He learnt that being calm feels better than stressing out and being reactive.

him with love and pity, I set up a consistent routine and firm boundaries. Bonding wasn't my first priority. My three other dogs simply ignored Dini. They are used to fosters and furry visitors, but never had I seen them give any dog such a wide berth and ignore a new pack mate so completely. I very quickly sought opinions and advice from many behaviourists and experts. In the beginning it was suggested that I keep Dini with me most of the day, on an umbilical leash, as it were – where I went, he went – in order to almost force him to bond with me. It wasn't long before he became my little shadow.

Exercise, discipline, affection

Every morning I would take him on a two-hour (or 10km) walk, and then we would head up the road to the dog parlour (or sometimes the vet). At the parlour (or vet) I slowly, patiently and compassionately systematically desensitised him. To start we would just go into the waiting room, and then go home. Next we would walk down the hall and into the grooming room (or vet's consultation room) then turn around and leave. Then we would go into the room and he would sit down and wait there for a couple of minutes (we extended the period slowly). He then had to sit down and wait in the room while the groomers shaved and clipped other dogs... and so on and so on we progressed. The sound of any electrical equipment (from clippers to lawnmowers) really upset him. When he was initially shaved, we noticed Dini had many scars and some long straight cuts which looked like they may have come from a garden edge-trimmer.

For the first few months, Dini could not be enticed with treats and had no food drive, which made it difficult to positively reinforce calm or good behaviour. Fortunately, he quickly learnt to trust and feel safe with me. He learnt that being calm feels better than stressing out and being reactive. This process took months, and the de-sensitisation process was repeated with many unfamiliar or stressful situations. It must have been at least three months before I could touch Dini with a soft baby brush, let alone a hand glove or rubber massage brush. Dini would react with teeth, snapping at the offending person or object... and yet he really had unbelievable bite inhibition, and his teeth rarely connected, and if they did, it did no harm.

One behaviourist who assessed Dini thought he had

hip dysplasia and was in pain because he did not sit down – EVER – and if you put pressure on his backside he would snap at you. None of the usual sit training methods worked, but a soft poke with a finger at the base of his tail worked like a charm and now Dini sits on command.

Learning to be a dog

Dini didn't learn the same way as other dogs, and in fact I would go so far as to say that before joining the Pana Pack, he never learnt to speak dog or be a dog. It amazed me that when I first gave him a meaty shin bone, he just didn't know what to do with it, but loved peanut butter and cheese (which had obviously become a favourite treat, living at the school).

It wasn't very long before he fell in love with people, and we fell head-over-tail in love with him! He became exceptionally affectionate and loved to cuddle or play with his tug-rope or fetch toys. Unfortunately, almost a year later, he still has dog issues. He has learnt to walk nicely on a leash and not to react at gates and fences, but if there is a head-on confrontation with a dog coming towards him, he is aggressive. We do many pack walks (sometimes with quite big packs of dogs) and when we are all going at a good pace in the same direction he is happy and fine, even off-lead. For the first time, almost a year after bringing him home, he is learning to play tag with a couple of dogs. Grooming still isn't a pleasurable experience, but he enjoys water and bathing, and even a brush with a rubber massage brush. He is still jumpy with mechanical, electronic or strange noises, but instead of getting upset, he looks at me to see if I have reacted, and if not, he generally agrees it isn't worth stressing about.

Despite all his issues, acting out and baggage, and everything he may have suffered, Dini truly has the greatest joie de vivre I have ever experienced. In spite of everything, he truly has an indomitable spirit and it was this (I believe) that made him resilient and a survivor. It would have been far more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to rehabilitate and integrate a dog with a broken heart or broken spirit. He truly wants to live and to give, is quick to embrace all that life has to offer, and there is no way we are ever going to part with him. ✨