

Seniors for Seniors

Older dogs can be the perfect match for older people.

Teri Goodman

When retired couple Norma and Harold Van Houten lost their 12-year-old Bearded Collie mix Mugsy, Harold resolved, "No more dogs!" The pain of losing Mugsy was just too great for the Illinois residents. But Norma says, "I wasn't used to being depressed all the time," so she set out to find another dog.

Among the people Norma contacted was Barb Cathey of Pets for Seniors. Cathey suggested they adopt a 7-year-old Pomeranian mix named Teddy. Norma says she wasn't convinced that she would be happy with a dog that old. She now reveals, "I'm so grateful to Barb for holding onto Teddy for me; she could have given him to someone else when I hesitated."

Adoption perks

Pets for Seniors is just one of a burgeoning number of organizations nationwide that support and promote seniors-for-seniors programs. Available through shelters, humane societies, and all-breed and breed-specific rescue groups, these programs match senior dogs, usually over the age of 5, with people over 55, and offer perks, such as reduced or waived adoption fees, help with veterinary expenses, and free starter supplies. The perks vary from group to group, but the basic tenet of the programs is the same for all: Senior pets are good for senior people.

Teddy has been the Van Houtens' dog for two years. You can tell that feelings of grief and depression are ancient history as Norma raves about Teddy, "He's so wonderful!" Harold recently bought two sets of pet steps for Teddy — to help him up onto the bed and the couch. Norma says, "He spent \$60! And we live on a fixed income!" But, she adds, "It's so much fun to see Teddy go one-two-three, and he's up on the bed."

So happy together

Having a pet generally means a happier, healthier life for an older person. Studies such as "The Role of Pets in Enhancing Human Well-being" and "Owning Pets Can Delay Loneliness for the Elderly" confirm it. One study even found that heart attack patients with dogs were six times more likely to survive beyond the first year after an attack than those without dogs.

But why are senior pets especially good for senior people? A senior dog is settled, requires only moderate exercise, has already been trained, and knows how to fit into a pack or family. Like senior humans, senior dogs want to relax and take time to savor the pleasures of life. Senior dogs also enjoy being active, however.

Marian Levy adopted 9-year-old Papillon Sassy last fall from San Francisco's Peninsula Humane Society. They walk together every day. "It's good for both of us," Levy says.

A dog can also bring a family closer together. Sassy is "cute, sweet, and well-behaved," Levy reports, and the entire family adores her, including her 56-year-old son who "gets down on the floor to play with her" when he visits.

Ten-year-old black Labrador Retriever Bunkie, adopted from PHS by Susie Ennis and her mom Jan, has endeared himself to every member of his new family. He relates beautifully to Jan, generously shares his bed with the resident cat, loves his walks with Susie, and also eagerly converses with everyone:

Susie: "Bunkie, are you a good boy?"

Bunkie: "Arrrooooooo!"

The programs

Scott Delucchi, PHS senior vice president, reports that in 2005 219 of its senior pets went to senior homes. He happily notes that the return rate for the seniors program is significantly lower than the rate for the shelter as a whole. He adds, "Seniors represent excellent adopters ... generally they have more time to devote to a new pet along with previous experience in caring for a pet."

Gary Tiscornia, executive director of the SPCA of Monterey County, Calif., enthuses over its new program, too. Called



Whiskers and Wisdom, the program asks for a \$10 adoption fee and includes a vet exam, spay or neuter surgery, vaccinations, as well as lifelong access to a behavior helpline and a guarantee that returns are accepted anytime an adopter cannot continue caring for an animal.

North Shore Animal League Vice President Joanne Yohannan says its seniors-for-seniors program in New York, initiated in 1997, contributed to the shelter's high rate of senior animal adoption. She notes, "Most seniors are taking adult dogs, not puppies."

Breed rescue groups like the English Springer Rescue America also find their senior adopters greatly pleased with their senior adoptees. Ruth Galvan, 74, of Texas, adopted 13-year-old Avery through ESRA's Springers for Seniors program last year. According to Felicia Adams, with the Austin chapter of ESRA, Avery refused at first to let other dogs or people get near her. Adams was concerned about Avery's adoption prospects, so she turned to Galvan, who is her mother, suggesting that she adopt Avery. She cautioned her mother, however, that Avery was ornery. Galvan replied to her daughter, "Well, I'm a little ornery, too." Much to everyone's delight, the two are now inseparable.

Teri Goodman is the founder and coordinator of The Senior Dogs project, an Internet-based operation located at www.srdogs.com that helps homeless dogs over the age of 5 find new homes.