

Popular Dogs: Maltese

Large-hearted volunteers rescue and place one tiny dog at a time.

Susan McCullough

In the days leading up to the 2001 Thanksgiving holiday, 10-year-old Tony didn't have much to be thankful for. His Charlotte, North Carolina, owner, who apparently no longer wanted to take care of a senior dog, had left the little Maltese out in the backyard to die. By the time a caring neighbor called the local animal-control officer, Tony was curled up into a small ball, shivering in the cold night air. He weighed only about half of what his weight should have been.

Fortunately, the kennel operator at Charlotte Animal Control knew what was needed to save Tony's life. She e-mailed several Maltese rescue groups based along the East Coast. Soon, Tony was on his way to a better future, starting with a car trip to Germantown, Maryland, where United Maltese Rescue volunteer Cathy Brown was waiting.

The Roots of Rescue

The work of Brown and others like her is the essence of Maltese rescue. They take care of needy dogs like Tony, and help heal both their physical and emotional wounds. Then they find permanent homes in which these dogs can live happily ever after.

Many volunteers are lifelong animal rescuers who eventually concentrate on Maltese after becoming involved with local or national breed clubs. One such rescuer is Debbie Kirsch, a volunteer from Bernardsville, New Jersey. "I have bred and shown Maltese for years," Kirsch explains. "A few years ago I realized that there were many Maltese being tossed aside. Even if I didn't breed them or if they didn't come from a reputable breeder, they still deserved a chance. I felt I owed it to the breed [to volunteer] for all the joy it has brought me."

Other volunteers take different routes to involvement in Maltese rescue. Joan Garvin, president of Metropolitan Maltese Rescue in New York City, says her group "developed from a group of pet owners in Manhattan. We had gotten together for play dates with our dogs and discovered that, amazingly, there was no Maltese breed rescue group in Manhattan. Being naïve, we thought, 'How hard could this be? How many people would give up a Maltese?' Nearly five years later we have taken in and placed over 270 Maltese and have a network of about 120 Maltese lovers," Garvin says.

Either way, volunteers reap great rewards in helping the unfortunate dogs they encounter. "The best part of rescue is placing our dogs into the most wonderful and loving homes we can find," says Debbie Birtwistle, a UMR volunteer in Oak Hill, Virginia. "Some of our dogs have never been inside a house to know how soft a chair, bed or even carpet feels. They've never felt grass on their feet, seen a sprinkler, chased a squirrel or walked on a leash because they've been kept in cages all their lives. They've never had a constant source of food, or they've lived in fear of human contact," Birtwistle continues. "To see these little ones blossom, become whole again and treated as part of a family is so rewarding."

However, involvement in Maltese rescue also has its drawbacks. "The worst aspect for me is knowing we can't save all of them," Birtwistle says. "We rely strictly on donations and just don't have the funding or the manpower to help all the Maltese in need. We do the best we can, but it's never enough."

Equally disheartening are the occasional failures that confront volunteers. Some dogs "are so sick that all we can do is find them a loving and peaceful ending," Garvin says. "We know that these painful times are also part of rescue."

Dealing with the drawbacks and experiencing the joys of rescue requires special qualities. "You have to be a caring, nurturing and patient person," Birtwistle says. "You also have to be committed to taking care of your 'foster' for however long it takes to find it a forever home. You need to work through housetraining, fear, health and any other issues that need addressing, just as if the dog were your own pet. You provide training, grooming, veterinary care, socialization, security, and most of all, a loving environment for that dog at a difficult time in its life."

Why Rescue Is Needed

Rescuers find plenty of Maltese that need help. These dogs are often homeless through no fault of their own. Instead, their owners are unable or unwilling to do what's required to raise a happy, healthy dog.

"Most people say they surrender their Maltese either because they don't have enough time for them anymore or because they're having housetraining issues," Kirsch says. "One may very well lead to the other. The lack of time is usually because the dog came before the children were born, and the dog has now been forced to take a back seat to the kids." Older children can pose potential problems, too. "People have toddlers who are being too rough with the dog because there is little or no parental supervision, and the dog begins is now nipping in self-defense," Birtwistle says. "So the dog gets the boot."

At the other end of the age spectrum, a Maltese may lose its home if it has an elderly owner who can no longer care for it or who has died.

Finally, human cruelty can deprive a Maltese of the home it needs. "Many Maltese are ending up in shelters as strays or being dumped there by owners who don't want to take care of it because it's elderly or sick," Birtwistle says. Other Maltese, like Tony, are abandoned in their own backyards.

But no matter why a Maltese enters rescue, the steps taken to save that dog's life are essentially the same. Tony's saga typifies a dog's path through rescue.

Rehabbing Tony

When Tony arrived at Brown's home on the night before Thanksgiving 2001, the little dog's horrific condition caused her to burst into tears. "I truly thought he was going to die," Brown recalls. "He was so thin -- nothing but skin draped over tiny bones."

Soon, however, Tony's affectionate nature helped to dissipate Brown's horror and anger. "He just snuggled into me and I was overwhelmed by his trust and love," Brown recalls. "That first night I mostly held him, wrapped in a blanket and rocked him like a baby. And I prayed that he would stay alive until I could get help."

Two days later, Brown brought Tony to her veterinarian, who discovered that the Maltese had several other health challenges to overcome. For one thing, "his mouth looked like it had a cocoon in it," Brown says. "I seriously thought some insect had laid eggs in his mouth. But the veterinarian proceeded to pull gobs and gobs of debris from his mouth. Apparently he'd just chewed and chewed on himself when he was covered in fleas, ticks and filth in the owner's yard, and the end result was that all of this hair and debris was trapped around his mostly rotten teeth."

Removing the debris from Tony's mouth was the first step toward helping the little dog recover. "Once the hair was out of his mouth, he began to eat like a piglet," Brown says. "I kept him on antibiotics for several weeks, and when he got up to a good weight (about 5 pounds) he was neutered and had his teeth cleaned. All but a few had to be pulled. That -- and keeping food available 24/7 -- was his physical rehabilitation."

Surprisingly, Tony's emotional state proved to be quite sound, but according to Brown, such soundness typifies rescued Maltese. "One would think that emotionally rehabilitating Tony would have been a hard case," Brown muses. "But my experience is that no matter how badly these guys have been treated, most are willing to love and trust another human -- some more quickly than others. Tony made the transition from being unwanted, abandoned and unfed to being loved and cared for in a heartbeat."

Tony's trusting acceptance of Brown's loving care put him well on the road to recovery and made him ready for adoption. By Christmas -- just a few weeks after he'd nearly died from starvation -- Tony weighed almost 6 pounds, and was ready to go to a new home.

A Happy Ending

Meanwhile, Joan Shoemaker, a widow in Timonium, Maryland, was looking for a dog to welcome into her home. Her previous canine companion had been euthanized due to cancer, and for many months Shoemaker thought she could never again bear to lose a beloved pet. But "after a couple of years without that smiling face to greet me when I came home, I just had to have a companion," Shoemaker says.

However, not just any companion would do. Because she was 70 years old, Shoemaker believed that an older dog would be better for her than a puppy. She also wanted a small dog that she could bring along with her whenever she left her home.

While surfing the internet, Shoemaker found the UMR website and began exchanging e-mails with Brown while waiting for a suitable dog to adopt. That wait ended several months later, when Brown told Shoemaker about Tony. "She told me that he was desperately ill and that they were not sure he would live," Shoemaker recalls. "But Cathy wanted to know if I would be interested in him if he did. I said I would, and filled out an adoption application." Such applications, which ask many questions about a potential adopter's history with dogs, help UMR and other rescue groups evaluate the applicant's suitability for adopting a rescued Maltese.

Through daily e-mails exchanges with Brown, Shoemaker monitored Tony's progress -- and just a few days before Christmas, the intrepid Maltese was ready to meet his permanent human companion. Brown drove the little dog to Shoemaker's home so that Brown, Shoemaker and the pooch could meet.

"I loved [Shoemaker] immediately," Brown recalls. "She was willing to do whatever it took to make Tony happy and had already bought him a new bed and toys and sweaters. Had she not been everything I expected or if Tony hadn't liked her, he would have come back home with me. But she was perfect."

For her part, Shoemaker quickly bonded with Tony despite one serious problem: his lack of basic bathroom manners. "He urinated wherever he chose," Shoemaker recalls. "We decided to try our best to correct it with immediate verbal reprimands, quick exits to the backyard, and lots of praise for a successful elimination outdoors. He is now a very good, trustworthy boy."

Shoemaker has clearly fallen in love with her Maltese buddy, who she has renamed Josh. "He is so loving and attentive," Shoemaker says. "He has captured our hearts."

Brown is thrilled with the happy ending to her former foster dog's saga. "Did Tony find a wonderful home?" she asks rhetorically. "Yes -- thanks to a whole lot of folks who cared enough to give him a chance! He will definitely live the rest of his life like the little prince he is."

6 Ways to Support Rescue

Maltese rescue groups, like so many other groups dedicated to helping homeless dogs, need plenty of help from kind-hearted individuals if they are to continue their work. Here are some of the ways to help that appear on the wish lists of such organizations.

1. Give some money. Maltese rescue organizations "are operating on a shoestring," says Cathy Brown of United Maltese Rescue. The fees that such organizations pay to adopters don't nearly cover the costs of fostering even a healthy, unneutered Maltese, much less a dog that is sick. Consequently, monetary donations are needed and welcomed—and are often tax deductible.
2. Foster a bond. People who are willing to provide temporary care to homeless Maltese -- what rescue groups call foster care -- are always welcome. However, veteran rescue volunteers caution that a would-be foster-care provider not only must nurture a Maltese in need, but also must be willing to let that dog depart to a permanent home when it is ready to do so.
3. Give the spa treatment. Maltese require some grooming to look their best for future adopters. Rescue groups appreciate the skills of trained groomers who will pretty-up rescue pooches for free -- or a donation to pay a professional groomer to do the job.
4. Offer some wheels. The rehabbing of a rescue Maltese can entail considerable travel -- from an animal shelter to a foster caregiver's home, to and from the groomer's, and to and from a veterinarian. People who are willing to transport Maltese to their various appointments earn the gratitude of those who are rescuing them.
5. Make some calls. Re-homing a Maltese also requires considerable time working the phone. Calls must be placed to shelters to see if they have any Maltese that need re-homing, to veterinarians to set up appointments for the rescued dogs and to would-be adopters to set up home visits. By putting in a little phone time, you can free foster caregivers to concentrate more on caring for the dogs in their charge.



6. Go visiting. Many Maltese rescue organizations visit the homes of would-be adopters in order to determine whether such homes would be suitable for rescued dogs. Volunteers who are willing to make these visits can play a vital role in making sure that a once-homeless Maltese will be placed in a happy, caring 'forever' home.