

Rescue Dog Helps Houston Woman Capture Prize

National photo-essay contest winner shows woman's bond with her Italian Greyhound.

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Kate Smargiasso and her rescued Italian Greyhound share a bond that helped the Houston, Texas, resident capture the grand prize in a national photo-essay contest that celebrates how profoundly pets and people make life better together.

The "Four Plus Two: Tales for the pet lover's heart" contest called on pet owners to share how companion animals enhance their lives. For Smargiasso, the instant connection that she felt when she welcomed her dog, Reznor, into her home in the spring of 2006 was an experience that she wanted to share with others, she said.

The underweight Italian Greyhound was rescued from a breeder who kept him inside a cage. He couldn't jump on the couch in Smargiasso's home since he had no leg muscles, a result of them not being used while kept in a crate, she said.

In her winning essay, she describes how Reznor now jumps higher than her kitchen countertops when it's treat time. "He is so full of love that I could not imagine how empty he felt during his 'breeding' days," she wrote.

While in her care, Reznor went from 5 pounds to nearly 8 pounds. Because his teeth were in terrible shape at first, some of them were pulled. Now, he gets regular cleanings and has sparkly whites, she said.

Rescuing Reznor gave Smargiasso a new outlook on the importance of rescue organizations. She plans to donate her prize, a year's supply of Nestlé Purina dog food, to the local animal organizations where she volunteers, including the Houston Humane Society.

In addition, she will receive an original portrait of herself and husband with Reznor and their other rescued Italian Greyhound, Gracie, by artist and illustrator C.F. Payne.

On Saturday, Oct. 25, the family will tune in for the national premiere of "Four Plus Two: Tales for the pet lover's heart" TV special, airing at 1 p.m. EST on WGN America. The hour-long show features seven other stories about people and their pets, including that of an emergency room veterinarian and a pet photographer.

Kroger and Nestlé Purina are co-sponsoring the contest and TV special, as well as contributing \$100,000 to local animal welfare groups. The Galveston County Animal Shelter, which is recovering and rebuilding its hard-hit facility in the wake of Hurricane Ike, and the Houston Humane Society, which helped the displaced pets affected by the storm, will each receive a \$6,250 donation.