

Pets with Disabilities: Giving a New Definition to 'Normal'



Austin in his wheelchair.

By Dick Myers
Editor

The proclamation from the Calvert County Board of County Commissioners tells of the beginnings: "This amazing journey began when Michael Dickerson and Joyce Darrell expanded their family by adopting a vibrant young shepherd whom they named Duke, which unexpectedly changed their lives forever. On a warm spring day, an accident left Duke paralyzed. While they were advised to euthanize him, told he would not have a quality life confined to a wheelchair, they still saw vibrance in him — their selfless, kind, and generous act would change the lives of many others for years to come."

In almost 20 years what poured out of that personal act of kindness to their pet has evolved into the nation's preeminent organization for the rescue, care and adoption of disabled four-legged creatures. It's called Pets with Disabilities and it's located right here in Calvert County.

The family's decision to save Duke was followed by another act of kindness when a woman donated a wheelchair for Duke. And Duke lived and thrived with the wheelchair for 13 years, Darrell said in an interview with *The County Times* on Feb. 18 at their facility in Prince Frederick.

The old cliché about one thing leading to another is true for what happened next. The Pets with Disabilities website continues the story: "A few months later we heard about another dog in need named Misty, who had been living in a NY shelter for over five years. Nobody wanted Misty because she had hind leg problems, and also needed a wheelchair. Hundreds and hundreds of people passed her cage, not even giving her a chance. We went to NY and adopted her immediately.

"After experiencing the impact of Duke and Misty on our family and everyone they met, we soon realized there was NO support or education for dogs and cats with physical disabilities. We started a grassroots organization and called it Pets with Disabilities. It quickly took on a life of its own!"

Darrell had operated a fitness center for years in Prince Frederick. She quit it to devote full-time to Pets with Disabilities. Dickerson has a full-time job as an elevator repairman, but he also remains active fixing wheelchairs donated to them and providing transport.

"We saw there was a need and we didn't know how much of a need until we really started because the organization has kind of taken over me," Darrell said about how things transpired. She noted, "There's a lot of disabled animals, dogs in the world that need a place to go and



Michael Dickerson (holding dog) and Joyce Darrell received a proclamation Feb. 5 from the Calvert County Board of County Commissioners.

need vet care, where shelters can't really do all that kind of stuff for them."

The couple mortgaged their home to purchase an adjacent 17 acres and created a colony of buildings for various purposes. One serves as the main kennel area; another is used for adoptions and another houses cats and other animals. It is surrounded by several fenced areas for the animals' protection.

Darrell explained the early years, from 1999 to 2007: "Michael and I would just go from city to city and just do all these big pet expos." And they took disabled dogs like Duke with them. "We'd just tell people about the organization and then things started evolving. It was like a small grassroots thing that has evolved."

The property is not open to the public. Anyone interested in adopting must fill out an application and make an appointment. It is, however, open occasionally for school and scout groups to learn more about what they do.

The non-profit organization depends on a combination of regular contributions, some grants and four major fundraisers every year. Darrell's friend and long-time volunteer Kathy Delio helps with fundraising including the sold-out "Night of Entertainment and Bingo" on March 9 and the upcoming event for which tickets are still available, June 7 at Running Hare Vineyard. See their website for more details.

Contributions can be made to a specific animal under the organizations care or periodic contributions can be directed to the "Healing Hearts – Critical Care Team," for the organization's continuing needs.

Pets with Disabilities is truly an international effort, with supporters not only around the country but around the world, and also international adoptions and taking in dogs that need help from other countries.

Darrell said, "Luckily we got some major exposure back (in 2009) when we were on the (NBC) Today show. Obviously, that was huge for us. It really put us on the map." That show was arranged after word got out that they had taken in a disabled dog from Russia.

Darrell was asked if there was one particularly unusual case that sticks in her mind. She responded, "It was a dog from Texas that jumped out of the Jeep and splayed his front legs." His front legs had neurological damage and were useless. Upon learning about Pets with Disabilities the owner of the dog named Austin drove him to Maryland.

Austin was in horrible pain, but she could still tell his spirit wasn't broken. Both front legs were amputated by Dr. Oakley at MASH in Huntingtown, the first such op-



Lucy, who is blind, is Joyce Darrell's constant companion at the Pets with Disabilities sanctuary.

eration he had ever done. "He calls him the 'Incredible Austin,'" she said.

Getting Austin used to the wheelchair took some time and a lot of patience. His confidence was built up playing with another of their dogs, Lucy, who is blind. But the end result can be seen on their website in the form of the smiling faces of a couple who adopted him.

Adoption is always the end game for any animal rescue organization and Pets with Disabilities is no different. However, there does come a time when a decision must be made about whether the disability would make adoption difficult. Wheelchair dogs, for instance, are hard to adopt because of the disability challenges. Once that decision is made the animal then has a forever home with Darrell and Dickerson.

Some of the statistics about Pets with Disabilities are staggering considering their small size, including 600 wheelchairs refurbished (many donated to individuals with disabled pets), 500 adoptions and two dozen dogs and cats currently in their care.

They don't go to adoption events. "They come here, and they sit in this room and we talk, and I get to know the humans and then the dogs can come in here. It's kind of a neutral spot for these dogs here," she said of the adoption building where the interview was conducted.

"I have to make sure that the dog is going to be good for the person and they've got the right type of home. It's tough," she said.

Darrell admits, "I really don't like being in the limelight at all, to be honest with you," and then reveals a little of why she does what admittedly is a difficult job: "Everyone has to do something in their life. It just happens to be something that we kind of fell into and we took it and rolled with it."

Delio, who had experience with disabled humans in her former job, added, "I love animals. I love what she does. I couldn't do what she does, but I can help her."

On the Pets with Disabilities website in the section that deals with ways to volunteer and help financially is a paragraph that also underscores their mission: "We look to you to help the dogs that are here waiting for those people that will take the time to see the unbroken spirit of our dogs. Our rescue stands alone in this regard. You cannot come and visit us and find a dog that isn't blind, deaf, in a wheelchair, etc. Although disabled to the unknowing eye, these animals are really just living their own 'normal.'"

For more information on Pets with Disabilities go to: <http://petswithdisabilities.org/>