

April 17, 2008

PAGE ONE

Pets, Like Wine, Often Age Well But Have Issues

**Red Collar Group Finds
Homes for Old Animals;
Bongo, Past His Prime**

By **CLARE ANSBERRY**

April 17, 2008

PITTSBURGH -- Bongo the rabbit had issues.

He was old, aloof and tough. During a brawl with another rabbit, Bongo lost a dime-size piece of his ear. His first home is unknown. His second was an animal shelter in rural Pennsylvania that reached rabbit overload and transferred him to another shelter here called Animal Friends.

Animal Friends takes abused, neglected and unwanted animals and tries to find them families. That can be challenging. Who wants a banged-up old rabbit? Or elderly cats and dogs that have thinning fur, missing teeth, cataracts and arthritic hips?

"A lot of folks aren't willing to adopt an older animal," says Ann Cadman, health and wellness coordinator at the shelter. "I had one woman say, 'Why would I want a used animal?'"

Ms. Cadman, who has adopted several elderly dogs, says they are affectionate and attentive. But she needed a way to persuade other people to adopt old animals, of which there are many at the shelter.

Some have been left by people who move, want a younger pet, or are overwhelmed by age-related maladies. A good number of the older rabbits were bought as Easter bunnies for small children. Months pass. The novelty wears off, and the cuddly little critters turn into rabbits, weighing up to 25 pounds if they are Flemish, that can bite if they don't want to be held. Animal Friends is a no-kill shelter, so once an animal arrives, it stays there or in foster care until it is adopted.

Ms. Cadman had an idea: Form an exclusive society for people who adopt older pets, by which she means dogs more than five years old and cats over six. Rabbits are considered old at three.

Members would get discounts on pet jewelry and apparel at the shelter boutique. They would be honored with a proclamation suitable for framing, and they are invited to coffee klatches.

Red Collar Society

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Ms. Cadman decided to call the group the Red Collar Society, after the well-known Red Hat Society, in which women over 50 glory in being middle-aged. "Both societies see age as something to celebrate," says Ms. Cadman.

Ms. Cadman's Red Collar Society appears to be effective. Since it was formed last April, more than 300 older cats, dogs and rabbits have been adopted from the shelter.

Members say older pets have distinct advantages. They are loving, calm, don't nip or insist on playing fetch. They don't gnaw as much on furniture and are good at visiting hospitals, nursing homes and elementary schools. Children with reading problems, for instance, will read aloud to Jazz, a seven-year-old black poodle, because he listens quietly and uncritically.

Maureen Pfeifer joined the Red Collar Society after adopting Erma, a Dalmatian somewhere between eight and 10 years old. Erma had a cloudy eye, bad teeth, a heart murmur and a tumor. A family had taken her but brought her back because she had too many things wrong with her.

"I always started with puppies and wanted another dog," says Ms. Pfeifer, who also has a seven-year-old dog that is in better health but getting creaky. "I love the idea of not having to house train. Erma knows basic commands already. It's really a lot easier."

Older animals available for adoption are advertised in the shelter newsletter, as well as in other local publications. Featured recently was T-Bone, a white seven-year-old cat originally from Egypt who responds to whistles just like a dog would, and Chester, a five-year-old coonhound who has a pleasing temperament and likes treats.



Wayne Croushore saw a picture of Bongo the rabbit and thought he might be good company for his other rabbit, Perkins, Perky for short. Mr. Croushore, 77 years old, adopted Bongo last year and became a Red Collar Society member. The retired insurance consultant has had pets all his life, including beagle puppies, which are cute but need housebreaking and obedience school. A few years ago, Mr. Croushore discovered rabbits and liked them as pets. "They're kind of like scotch, an acquired taste," he

says.

Rakish Bongo

Far more interesting than he imagined, they growl when they are unhappy. Some cry and grind their teeth. Their personalities vary. Perky is just that. Bongo is rakish -- tough, aggressive and independent, like a one-legged pirate, Mr. Croushore says. Buddy, his first rabbit, who has since died, came up the steps at 11 every night to have his ears scratched. Buddy's ashes are in a white ceramic dish on a shelf in Mr. Croushore's basement.

The key to making these relationships work is education. There's a class at Animal Friends on geriatric cats taught by a feline-massage therapist. Red Collar members can attend monthly programs on bonding and estate planning. Mr. Croushore has arranged for Bongo and Perkins to be taken care of by Animal Friends if they outlive him.

There are downsides. Elderly pets can have expensive medical problems, such as strokes and failing

vision. Glaucoma drops can cost \$90. Older pets need to be taken out more at night. Aging rabbits need dental work. Geriatric pets need low-impact exercise. Fat and calories need to be watched in their diets. Older animals can become disoriented. An Australian study published in the Journal of Small Animal Practice reported that 28% of cats aged 11 to 14 develop at least one geriatric-onset behavioral problem, such as forgetfulness. This rises to over half of cats 15 years of age and older.

Trading Tips

Mary Soukup, a retired teacher, provides foster care to the sickest older animals at Animal Friends, nursing them until they can be adopted. She often cares for dogs showing signs of dementia. She watches for telltale symptoms, such as going into a corner and being unable to get out. She is an unofficial Red Collar Society member because she hasn't officially adopted a pet, but she takes care of many. She currently has two: Bagel the beagle, a 12-year-old with arthritis, and 16-year-old Hercules, a Yorkshire terrier, who is blind.

She and the two dogs attended a recent coffee klatch. Over refreshments, Ms. Soukup and other owners traded tips. A fish-oil tablet, good for the heart and coat, is eagerly gobbled up by dogs if it is wrapped in salami. Pets at the social gathering traded stares and sniffs.

Old pets can learn new tricks, some society members say. Katie Tontala points to her 11-year-old cat, Karma, whom she adopted last year.

Karma is deaf and thus can't hear a can being opened; most cats know that the sound means dinner is served. Ms. Tontala taught Karma sign language. She puts her fingers to her mouth and taps her lips. Karma comes.

Write to Clare Ansberry at clare.ansberry@wsj.com¹

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120839843386821735.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <mailto:clare.ansberry@wsj.com>

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

RELATED ARTICLES FROM ACROSS THE WEB

[More related content](#)

Powered by Sphere 