



**“We are the ones who...”**

**A tribute to the NorCal Collie Rescue volunteers,  
and animal rescue workers everywhere.**

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Recently I was sharing with a friend my frustration about how much collie rescue continues to claim of my life. Her reaction was to leap into a series of admonishments, in a well-meaning attempt to help me.

“You’re not the only person in the world. If you don’t respond [to a needy collie], someone else will take care of it.”

I replied, “Well, no. The shelter calls me when a collie has failed all their tests for adoptability and is scheduled for euthanasia. I am the last resort. If I don’t respond, that dog will die.”

Absorbing that, she came back “Get someone else to do it”.

I replied “Who?”

“What about all those people who helped you with the Yolo County case? Have one of them help you”.

I replied “I have, and they are all helping, as much as they can.”

“OK, go find someone at the Vet School. Get them to do it”.

I was wondering whom at the “Vet School” she had in mind. But I replied, “They *are* doing rescue. Everyone who is stepping up to do rescue is doing as much as they can. Still, something like 15 million dogs are euthanized in shelters each year.”

I tried to explain that we carve out a relatively manageable piece of this overwhelming disaster by focusing only on purebred collies. We have a ready-made group of adopters who seek us out all over the western U.S. and Canada because the supply of rescued collies cannot meet the demand. That’s not to say we rehome every collie instantly, but we are somehow able to place virtually all of the 50-odd collies that are at risk and come to our attention each year—one collie per week.

A well functioning collie rescue organization is a service-oriented, crisis-driven, complex business. Only official corporations with tax-exempt status granted by the I.R.S. can meet the brisk demands of animal rescue. That means that a group of volunteers (usually—there is barely enough money to care for the animals or to reimburse the volunteers for all of their expenses, much less pay for their time) must organize and be able to get along with each other under stress. Someone has to know a lot about the laws governing this activity—the state’s corporation code, the state and federal tax codes, and all the laws governing humane societies, including the Vincent and Hayden laws in California. Someone must know how to keep business books and accounts. Someone must know about how to develop and run a web site, essential for rescue business these days, to attract adopters and donors and be accessible to relinquishing owners and shelters. Someone has to know about how to raise money, and comply with all the state and federal tax codes and how to write grants, court donors, and think of clever ways to be “heard” in the vast field of hungry charities. Someone has to be available to take calls from the potential adopters and have the patience to develop relationships with the likely people to adopt all the needy dogs that we have to empty from our few precious foster homes. Rescue, after all, is a service business.

Most of all, someone has to take in needy collies—dogs that come into rescue most often as complete unknowns. They are often filthy, sick, and scared. They all too often have been neglected, abused and

abandoned. Sometimes their grieving, loving owners have fallen on hard times through no fault of their own and are giving up their dogs as a last act of caring and kindness. No matter how they get here, collies come into rescue confused and disoriented, and often grieving themselves for the loss of their family and home. Someone has to be a “front-line foster home” willing to take in unknown, “raw” dogs and rehabilitate them for placement ultimately in an ordinary pet owner’s home, or until then in another, less skilled foster home.

A small army of qualified, dedicated, selfless people is needed to meet the demands of most rescue businesses, but usually there is no army, not even a small one. Usually there is just a handful of people who make great sacrifices in their lives, with little time for rest and recovery, while the relentless, endless march of unwanted innocent victims finds their way to the rescue organization’s door.

Once I overheard a conversation on an email list. Two list members were congratulating themselves on having saved a collie that day. They were genuinely proud of themselves. Their posts to the list glowed with the satisfaction that they felt. What had they done? One had found a collie in a shelter posted on the internet. She had forwarded that find in an email to the other person, who then forwarded the email on to collie rescue. The two list members were done. Referring a collie to “collie rescue” was their version of saving a collie.

Once one of our volunteers, Karen, was despairing of what had happened to her life. One too many collies had landed in her home. Karen and I do most by far of the “first-line fostering” for collies coming into NCR. I felt her pain, no question. So did Karen’s mother, who wanted to help her daughter. “Dear, why don’t you call collie rescue?” Karen replied “Mom, I *am* collie rescue.”



So, who is “collie rescue?” We in collie rescue often feel overwhelmed by the task we have taken on. Sometimes I think many people view “rescue” as our particular hobby. Just as they do dog agility, or obedience or conformation breeding for enjoyment, I think they view us as enjoying rescue as our “hobby,” something we choose to do to pass time, because we prefer to do this instead of some other hobby.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. We do rescue because we have to, we feel. We do it as duty, not because we love rescue. We love the dogs, but we hate the reasons why dogs come into rescue and we hate what rescue does to our lives and to those of our own dogs. Dogs come into rescue because of human failings. The dogs are innocent victims. We are the infrastructure of the dog fancy. We are here only because other people are making more purebred collies than there are good homes for.

If you make purebred collies, and you’re reading this, I’m sure that you try hard to put your puppies into truly permanent “forever homes.” Do you follow up on your puppy placements? Do you insist that your collies come back to you? Do you think that collies only from irresponsible back yard breeders or puppy mills come into rescue? Think again. We get collies in from all possible sources. In NCR, at least one-third to one-half of the collies we rescue are bred by Collie Club of America members in good standing. Do you do anything to assist your local collie rescue organization? We in “collie rescue” cannot really help all the collies that need us. We need help ourselves, so that we can help the collies.

Why don’t more people join us? It’s surely because of the demands that rescue makes on us, on our time, on our emotions, and on our lives. No question—rescue is very inconvenient. Collies fall into danger and risk at the worst possible times, with no respect for our schedules. Often, new enthusiastic volunteers will tell me: “I want to help! What I can do? The only things I can’t do are to go into shelters (because they make me too depressed) and foster, because ... (read excuse #x: My dog doesn’t like other dogs. I have to work all day. My spouse won’t let me have more than x dogs. I breed collies and I can’t have rescue dogs bringing diseases into my kennels ...). One volunteer innocently asked me “If I find a collie in a shelter, where will I take it?” In other words, people want to help, but not if it means they have to put their hands on a dog and take that dog into their homes and lives.

Collie rescue is about the dogs. Dogs are at risk and need to be taken out of harm's way. They need to be loved, rehabilitated and sent on to new lives, in what we hope are their forever homes.

Will you join us? We need you.

We are the ones who walk into shelters, look a dog in the eye and say "you live" or "you die" today.

We are the ones who mop up after others. We do things other people are not willing to do. We make other people feel good, because they don't have to worry about sweet, innocent, wonderful collies dying for no good reason. Someone else will take care of it. We are the "someone else's" who take care of it for you.

We are the ones who take dirty, sick, wild, unsocialized, untrained dogs into our homes. Do we need outside kennels to keep these "raw" dogs out of our houses? Not for preparing a dog to live as a pet dog, no. We are the ones who roll up our sleeves and put our hands on these unknown dogs. We might be bitten, or one of our pets might be bitten or killed, because no one knows how this strange dog will react to new dogs, new experiences, and small animals and children. Our furniture, carpets, floors, and doors all bear the marks of poorly mannered collies, unused to living as house dogs.

We are the ones who have to navigate an affordable path through sometimes expensive veterinary care to get these dogs healthy and able to be placed in an ordinary home. We have to have extensive knowledge of veterinary medicine, dog behavior, and dog training.

We are the ones who take phone calls and emails, and develop relationships with many nice, wonderful people who adopt the dogs and become our friends. We are also the ones who necessarily anger potential adopters who are not in our estimation able to care for a certain dog or any dog. We are the ones who spend what seems like an endless amount of time in front of a computer, or in a van driving to a distant shelter, a distant home check, or ferrying a dog from here to there like the underground railroad. We never get reimbursed for any of that—for our computers, or email, or mileage, or phone bills.

In participating in this intense business, we often ruin our homes, yards, and relationships. Divorces happen and friendships are lost. Family members may be disparaging, thinking that you care more about animals than them, and therefore you are selfish. Family members or employers may put strict limits on how far you can go down the path of rescue.

We often despair at how we can return to "normal" lives. We know that if we step away, chances are there will be no one to replace us.

Why do we do it? Maybe reading Monty's story can explain why.

### Monty: A collie rescue story.

I could tell any number of collies' stories, but today Monty is on my mind.

Because of the success of NorCal Collie Rescue, and the ironic unbearable stresses that that success has begun to place on our lives, I have decided to triage by taking in only those collies who would die, should I not be there for them.

Those calls still come far too often.

A day or two before Christmas, we learned of a collie on "stray hold" at the Contra Costa County shelter in Martinez. Whenever that happens, we hope against hope that the collie's owners will come and get him.

No one came to get this collie. Billie went down to see him, to evaluate him for NorCal Collie Rescue. It seems that this collie had been living on the streets for some time. He was filthy and had injuries. We doubted that he had any owners at this point looking for him.



Sure enough, the day after Christmas, the shelter veterinarian evaluated him and failed him on “health.” He was scheduled to be euthanized on Friday, December 29, the first day he would be released from “stray hold” (the Hayden law).

We know that shelters are overstretched, chaotic places. Even if we insisted we were coming to get him on Friday, the first day I could possibly take him in, he might well be killed before we could get there. So Andrea and I decided that I would get him the next day, two days before his kill date.

I had plans for that day, but they didn’t matter now. I grabbed a couple of my own neglected dogs to take with me, to comfort this new dog on his way home. I gathered the information I’d need to “pull” him from the shelter (evidence of our 501(c)(3) and a copy of NCR’s application to be an approved relinquishing organization), and we departed for the hour and one-half drive to Martinez.

Once there, I found a collie who looked exactly like “Pal,” the first collie actor to play “Lassie” with the Weatherwax kennels. He was sweet and greeted me eagerly. I grabbed his kennel card and “sprang” him from the shelter. The dog I took out of the shelter was clearly suffering from what I call “shelter shock,” that peculiar state that I’ve seen in so many condemned collies that I have taken from shelters. He was both frantic and disconnected. He pulled on his leash to get the heck out of there. Once released from his kennel, he had no connection with me at all. He was hell bent to leave.

I put him in my van and went directly to my veterinarian. I asked my rescue-friendly vet to board him for two days. I had 10 collies at my house. I simply could not take even one more collie in. My vet would board him the day before his neutering surgery and the day after, until I would send two of the ten to their homes and then have a little room to take this dog in.

He would need a name between the time we left the shelter and I arrived at my vet’s, so I turned on my radio and watched for road signs, hoping that the right name would come to me in the next two hours. One road sign inspired me to name this Lassie “Monty” and so Monty he became.

On Friday, I took Monty home. He was filthy and matted. Despite his surgery and stitches, I needed to groom him so he could be comfortable and so other volunteers down the line would not have to. Andrea was coming to get him, because I’d howled my primal scream so many times before... I am fostering 4 dogs in addition to my own 4, I cannot take in another dog. So while she drove the hour-and-one-half to get to my home, I worked on Monty to clean him up.

Monty got over shelter shock almost immediately upon coming into my house. He quickly passed the test that my own dogs presented for him. He was a sweet, young collie eager to be deferential to my dogs. He wanted to belong. I took him into my spare bathroom and gently started to brush out months of filth and shed hair. I was careful. I knew that he could have wounds underneath his matted coat, and he could be in pain, so he could bite me, then condemning him to being unadoptable. I was *very* careful. He was thin and starving, so I took a bowl of kibble in with me to groom him. I brushed gently and fed him by hand, again, and again in a rhythm.

Monty knew at this point that I was trying to help him. He had already started to press his head into me at my vet’s, to use me as a refuge and as safety. With some food in his stomach, and gentle caresses from me, now in a home after weeks on the street, many days in a shelter, he began to relax. He uttered a huge, ragged sigh, put his head on my knee, and fell into a deep sleep.

When Monty was finally clean and scrubbed and dried, and although he had a coarse coat from malnutrition, he glowed. Once he was clean, fed, loved, and secure, Monty suddenly went into a frenzy of joy. He threw himself into my lap, and rolled and rolled. He did the zoomies around the house. He ended up on my bed, where he rolled with all four feet in the air. Monty was the definition of joy, and relief. He

knew he was saved. This was the day he was scheduled to die. Instead, he was home. Monty told me in no uncertain terms that he was home, he was loved, and he was incredibly grateful.

And so why did Monty fail health? He had a scratch under his chin that had become infected. He would die because he was not perfect. He is a marvelous dog, the personification of Lassie herself. He would make some grateful family very happy. He would be a cherished, loved pet dog. He would make a huge difference in someone's life. But in the chaotic, overburdened world of animal rescue, he would die because he had a scratch.

In the shelter world, there is no good reason to kill an animal. There is only a reason. So many have to die.

We do rescue, and set aside our own lives, because of the Monty's. Perfectly normal sweet, innocent dogs find themselves in harm's way through no fault of their own. Some of the collie breeders I've talked to think that euthanasia is a reasonable fate for these dogs. Yet...a scratch? Monty is not a show collie, no. But he has a true collie temperament and he will make some family very happy. His scratch was easy to fix. He will live to be the love of a child's life, or comfort a lonely widow, or raise a family's children. He will be Lassie to someone.

We are the ones who make love matches. This is why we do rescue. Please join us.

