

The Patriot-News

A New Leash on Life

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Jericho the German shepherd is showing off.

He flips his tattered, pink flamingo chew toy around the living room and then lovingly comes over and lays his massive head in a visitor's lap. Brown eyes upturned, he hopes there's a game of tug-o-war in his future.

When he gets bored with visiting, he trots outside his new home, lying down in the yard to watch the birds and squirrels.

It's a beautiful life in Monroe Twp., Cumberland County.

And it almost never was.

In March 2008, a utility worker in Adams County spotted an emaciated, freezing Jericho chained in the backyard of a home.

Video captured by the Adams County SPCA and available on YouTube shows the dog's misery. His only shelter was a large dog crate holding a few inches of water. Battered metal bowls held no food or water. Curled in a sad heap, Jericho tried to keep his 37-pound frame warm against the barren earth.

When rescue workers took him back to the shelter, he couldn't stand up. In addition to being starved and dehydrated, Jericho had hypothermia. The only way to warm him up -- and his only chance of avoiding being put down -- was a pricey canine blood transfusion.

Through a series of phone calls, the shelter found The Merrick Fund Foundation, a Lower Swatara Twp.-based nonprofit. Its sole mission is giving otherwise adoptable animals the expensive emergency medical treatment needed to save their lives. The fund, co-founded by Amy Wimmersberger and Evelyn Bertoni, is named in honor of Merrick, a yellow lab found in deplorable conditions in East Pennsboro Twp. three years ago.

Merrick died on the way to an emergency vet, more than 12 hours after being found sick, starving and with a bee-infested tumor, Wimmersberger said. The delay in medical attention came because the shelter where he was taken couldn't afford immediate treatment.

"We said [that] if the reason that dog didn't go anywhere [for treatment sooner] is because they couldn't pay for it, we would," Wimmersberger said.

After investigating some options with local shelters, Bertoni and Wimmersberger decided to become their own nonprofit entity. That way, they could help as many animals as possible, they said.

Because there are no offices and no paid staff, every dollar the Merrick Fund receives goes toward helping a sick animal, Wimmersberger said.

This year, the fund -- it helps cats as well as dogs -- has given out \$17,479 to shelters in central Pennsylvania. The Merrick Fund paid for the \$943 transfusions that saved the German shepherd's life.

A loving foster home took Jericho in while he waited for adoption.

Around the same time Jericho was undergoing his ordeal, Rex Carmichael was working through the loss of his beloved Boris, a 14-year-old shepherd with whom he'd competed for a decade in German police dog trials.

Carmichael said he was pondering purchasing and training another puppy when his wife, Molly, brought up the possibility of spending winters doing something other than driving to dog trials.

"So I thought, let's get an older dog, and we started looking," Rex Carmichael said. "We found the Adams County shelter and I went down to look at Jericho. I saw him and then I said, 'See you later.' But all that week, something was nagging at me. So I said, 'Heck, I'll go get that dog.'"

While Jericho proved to be a house dog who avoided jumping on furniture and was already housebroken, the Carmichaels said they were amazed by the psychological scars their new dog exhibited.

He'd scarf his food, Rex Carmichael said. When Jericho was outside, he'd dig up strips of lawn and eat the grubs. In fact, he'd eat anything he could get his mouth around.

It was amazing, and disconcerting, to witness, Carmichael said. However, he and Molly said they were grateful Jericho was so resourceful. Otherwise, it's possible he might not have lived as long as he did.

The couple hadn't known the Merrick Fund helped Jericho until Rex Carmichael and a running friend signed up for the Merrick 5K run this fall. When he began telling the event's organizers about his dog, they realized Jericho was one of the animals they'd helped.

Of course, Carmichael said, he made sure Jericho, who loves to run, came along for the day. More than a year and a half -- and about 45 pounds -- after being rescued, Jericho is coming into his own.

He's protective of Molly, following her through the house and yard. He'll even follow her to bed.

A few weeks ago, Jericho jumped up into her lap for the first time. It scared her half-to-death, she said with a laugh, but she was amazed Jericho trusted her that much.

The Merrick Fund, Molly Carmichael said, has her and Rex's deep thanks.

"They helped bring the dog that weighed 37 pounds to this," she said, scratching his head.

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