



Sherri Franklin with Sierra, one of the elderly dogs she's helped through Muttville Senior Dog Rescue in San Francisco.

A NEW LEASH ON LIFE

BY KATIE MORELL

It was in the late 1980s when Sherri Franklin, a longtime hair stylist, decided to start volunteering at animal shelters in San Francisco. Skittish at first, she worried about her potential reactions to the heart-wrenching sights of dogs in cages, in need of attention.

Within months, though, she was hooked, soon putting in nearly 20 hours per week.

"I noticed that volunteers wouldn't come in to walk the dogs on Christmas Day or the Fourth of July, so it became a cathartic way for me to deal with the holidays, which have never really been my thing anyway," she says.

The hardest part of her experience was witnessing old dogs come into shelters happy and then slowly lose hope. "They would stop wagging their tails; dogs would get euthanized just because they were old," she said. "That is what got me to go back every day."

Compelled to help aging dogs, by the mid-'90s Franklin started bringing them into her home, helping them get healthy and adopting them out to friends and some of her hairstyling clients. She did this for more than 10 years—putting up flyers at beaches and parks for senior dogs, building ramps in her home so they'd stay safe—all the while telling her community how much she'd love to one day launch a senior dog rescue.

In 2007, she decided to take the plunge and opened Muttville Senior Dog Rescue. Muttville rescued 27 dogs during its first year as a nonprofit and has only grown from there. The organization rescued 1,051 senior dogs in 2017 alone.

Walking into Muttville now—located at 255 Alabama Street in the same building as the San Francisco SPCA—can be likened to walking into a senior dog's version of Disneyland. No cages, only plush beds to sleep on. Hugs and walks from more than 30 volunteers on a daily basis. Around-the-clock veterinary care. And tons of adoption

events; average wait times for successful adoptions hover just around 28 days.

While the main Muttville office houses between 20 and 30 dogs at any given time, the organization fosters out at least 50 at a time.

But why do people give up their senior dogs?

"There are so many reasons," she says. "We get dogs from people who've passed away, people who are going to nursing homes, people who can no longer care for their animal, people who are getting divorced or moving.

"One of the saddest ones I've seen was when a man came in with his two dogs because he was moving into a senior living facility and couldn't take them with him. Those dogs had spent their entire lives in a loving home. I don't cry often, but after he left I cried for a very long time."

Dogs also come to Muttville from other rescues, locally based and nationally.

"We also got dogs who were abandoned after Hurricane Harvey and about 16 or so from the Sonoma fires," she notes.

Lucky for the dogs, there are plenty of options for adoption. Muttville's Seniors for Seniors program waives the \$200 adoption fee for anyone

over 62 and includes a dog welcome kit. The organization even has a hospice program, where Muttville will pay for palliative care while the dog lives out its life in a loving, adoptive home.

"We have a woman who has adopted seven hospice dogs," Franklin marvels. "It is incredible."

Muttville hosts adoption events at 255 Alabama Street from 12 p.m. to 4 p.m. every Saturday and Sunday. A Valentine's Day-themed adoption-a-thon is scheduled for the weekend of February 10, where the \$200 fee will be waived to all qualified adopters. For those who cannot adopt, volunteering is a great option and donations are also welcome. (It costs \$1,600 to rescue one dog).

Who adopts Muttville dogs?

"It's across the board," says Franklin. "We have younger people who want a dog but don't know what kind of life they will have in five to 10 years, people who are in college, families who want a mellow dog and seniors. We always want to make sure the match fits everyone, so we gladly will take back dogs that aren't a good fit, but we find that most people fall in love immediately."

For more information, go to muttville.org