



## The Oregonian

### A special pet's waiting for you to give precious gift of a home

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Sometimes when I go to animal shelters, I feel like I'm visiting the Island of Misfit Toys. Oh sure, there are always adorable little kittens and handsome young dogs that will get adopted in a heartbeat.

But some animals are so not-quite perfect. They might be too old. Or not in good health. Or not beautiful. Some sit for months or years waiting for someone to notice the light in their eyes, the wisdom in their spirits, the love in their hearts.

Sometimes no one ever does.

But on Christmas Day it's time to talk about little miracles. I asked three shelters to introduce me to people who have selected animals that everyone else passed by. And it turns out that those are always the best pets a person could have.

#### Emily

To most people, Emily is a not-quite-average looking little tabby cat. Her eyes don't have the beautiful, mysterious look that other cats' do, because Emily's autoimmune disease keeps them red-rimmed.

When Laura Speirs looks at her cat, she sees what counts: This cat loves her. "She fills such a huge place in my heart. She's always with me," she said.

Emily is as bonded to her owner as the most loyal dog. In fact, this cat merrily rides in the car on errands.

This happy ending didn't look likely when Speirs adopted Emily from the Cat Adoption Team in Sherwood eight years ago. The kitty's autoimmune disease had caused her fur to fall out, she barely weighed 5 pounds, she'd had a series of ringworm infections and suffered from unhealed surgical incisions. Veterinary specialists had been called in, and no one had been able to help.

Speirs, who is a certified cat behaviorist and volunteers at the Cat Adoption Team, said she'd foster Emily. Speirs often provides a foster home for terminally ill cats, so they have a warm and loving home at the end of their lives.

But Emily didn't die. With the help of a naturopathic veterinarian, Emily's conditions got better. Emily became Speirs' closest buddy -- her rock after a divorce. It was healing together that made Speirs and her cat so close.

"We've just been through so much together," Speirs said, the cat snuggled deeply in her lap. "Taking on Emily was the most unexpected blessing of my life."

Want a cat as great as Emily?

I asked each shelter to tell me about one animal that needs a home now. The Cat Adoption Team introduced to Cocoa, a big, mostly black cat.

Cocoa's medium-length hair can look a little disheveled. And she's a bit, uh, big-boned. She has autoimmune problems that have been well-managed with medication. But look past that, and you will meet the most loving cat imaginable. "She's very affectionate. She'll give kisses. She gets along with other kitties," said Kathy Covey, the Cat Adoption Team's public relations and marketing manager. This cat even likes calm children. She's been at the shelter since February.

### **Sissee**

Steve Baltazar couldn't understand why, with all the people coming to the Oregon Humane Society looking for a good pet, no one adopted Sissee.

She's a pretty, slim, gentle, tan-colored dog who is 8 to 10 years old. Still, she was overlooked, week after week.

Baltazar recently moved from downtown Portland to rural Clark County and decided he had room for one more dog. He knew who: Sissee.

Sissee went to her new country home Nov. 1. Now she's out of her shell, running in the grass, playing with other dogs, relaxed with the people who love her.

Baltazar, a soft-spoken man, bubbles with enthusiasm when he talks about the joys of adopting an older dog. "They are the sweetest dogs. They're calmed down. They have wonderful, sad expressions. Their eyes are so loving."

Sissee was no exception. "She's very, very loyal," he said. "When you take a dog from a shelter, they are the most loyal dogs."

Want a loving dog like Sissee?

How about two? Spunky, a Saint Bernard/Labrador mix, and Pepper, a blue heeler mix, are the Oregon Humane Society's hard-luck couple.

These two dogs had an owner who loved them, but the person died. That was trip one to the shelter. After a long time, they were adopted by another loving owner -- and she died. So, they're back at the humane society.

They are about 11 now, and so bonded that it would be cruel to separate them. They've waited for a home since August. They'll stay safe and sound until the right home comes along. Still, even life in a great shelter isn't like life in a home.

"You can tell the two of them are saying, 'This is it for us, isn't it?' " said Tanya Roberts, director of training and behavior. **Gracie**

It was about this time seven years ago when someone left a kitten by the PAWS Animal Shelter in West Linn.

"Gracie was dying. She had fleas crawling across her eyes. She was so scared and tiny and shivering," remembers Liz Buman of West Linn, who has volunteered at the shelter for several years. She remembers thinking: Who is going to adopt this kitty? "Then I thought, it's going to be me," she said.

Gracie grew up to be a petite tabby cat with enormous green eyes. She's the queen bee in a home that includes cats that all have hard-luck stories. They've been abused. They've been sick. They've been scared of people.

Buman says adopting a cat that's faced tough times is an antidote to an uncertain world. "There are so many things going on . . . that are out of our control. This is one thing we can do," she said.

Want a cat like Gracie?

Marlee Matlin has been at the PAWS Animal Shelter in West Linn for five Christmases. She's deaf and has neurological problems. But look beyond that, and she is one special kitty.

"She loves with abandon. I give her a sign that means 'Come here and I'll love you' and she comes helter-skelter across the floor," says Sharon Murphy, PAWS executive director.

We love animals because they look past our own flaws. People who adopt special-needs pets look at animals with the same grace.

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