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Hanks: Give a homeless animal a chance at a soft landing

Anna Hanks, Local Contributor



Alberto Martinez/American-Statesman

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Kim Maguire reaches through a kennel fence to touch a dog at the Austin Animal Center in January. The facility is so far over capacity that 518 animals are being housed offsite.

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Updated: 7:49 p.m. Saturday, June 16, 2012
Published: 7:42 p.m. Saturday, June 16, 2012

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Recently the Austin Animal Center has received more animals than they can handle. They are at full-as-a-tick capacity, with an additional 518 dogs and cats in offsite foster care.

Hearing about the number of homeless animals makes me sad because our dog Spanky had a hard time getting to us. He spent a lot of time in shelters while looking for our forever home.

Every pet I've ever owned has come to me with a past. It just happens that Spanky, whom I once called "Spanky the hard-luck foster dog," had a particularly rough past.

It was Spanky's tragic backstory that got him in our front door.

Spanky originally came to us as a sickly foster dog during the 2010 Christmas break. Just before the holiday, my husband forwarded me a heart-tugging Southwestern University campus email from Laura Hobgood-Oster, religion professor and recidivist dog rescuer. "Spanky is an adult yellow lab mix who has had a rough life and really needs to catch a break!" Hobgood-Oster wrote.

My husband is a soft touch, so we became Spanky's break.

At 7 years old, Spanky is a middle-aged dog with the head of a yellow Labrador attached to the long legs and mellow temperament of a Saluki, or Persian greyhound. He acts a lot like a cat in a dog suit.

When Spanky first came to us, he was finishing up antibiotics for bronchitis. He had a damaged saliva gland that resulted in an extremely unsightly swelling under his chin, and he was so skinny that we could clearly see his heart beating while he slept.

On his kennel card, under "distinguishing marks," was the rather ominous notation, "fractured back leg."

Given Spanky's ragged condition, no one was surprised to hear about his eventful past.

We are uncertain when and where Spanky was born, but his official record begins with being picked up by Hutto's Animal Control on July 11, 2007, and winding up at the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter.

Spanky's paper trail continues with vet records at the Georgetown Veterinary Hospital, indicating that he was adopted by a family in September 2007.

Spanky's troubled past includes a stint as a Georgetown-area "escape artist" who got hit by a car while he took himself on a walkabout.

After his 2010 accident, he was described by a vet tech at the Georgetown Veterinary Hospital as an "owner surrender."

Spanky arrived back at the Williamson County Regional Animal Shelter in July 2010.

When that shelter became overcrowded with large dogs, Spanky was selected by volunteers (including Hobgood-Oster) to be moved to the Georgetown Municipal Shelter that November. Spanky didn't do well at that shelter, either, which is why Hobgood-Oster was looking for someone to foster him during the holidays.

When Spanky first came to stay with us, we carefully introduced him

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to our big older dog, Duke. The two of them got along, but Spanky was more interested in catching up on his sleep than anything else.

After spending the holidays with Spanky, I didn't have the heart to return the fully housebroken and usually snoozing pooch. He looked so comfortable sleeping in my living room. Who wants to wake up a guest just to tell them they have to go home?

A year and a half after Spanky arrived as a sick foster dog, the dude is doing well.

He drags my husband on a brisk neighborhood walk every morning. He has developed a taste for P. Terry's fries and anything buttered.

Spanky's days are now spent seeking the squishiest spot on our sectional sofa. Like many other dogs, he finds both thunderstorms and baths traumatizing.

Even though Spanky is 70 pounds, my husband regularly hauls Spanky into his lap, pretending that he's the world's largest lap dog.

"He landed in cake," Hobgood-Oster said when she came to see Spanky and he jumped off the sofa to greet her.

Next time you are looking for a four-footed family member, you might consider adopting one of these hard-luck cases.

Or you could try fostering a hard-luck animal. I hear that many people are actually capable of returning foster animals to a shelter so that they can be adopted by other people.

If you want to try fostering, plenty of groups here in town would love to have your help.

I'm so grateful for everyone who helped Spanky survive on his way into our lives.

All the homeless animals deserve to have the chance to land in cake.

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