



Sylvia VanAtta and husband Bill, who run the Many Tears Charity. Photos courtesy of Adrian Sherratt

Touching tales



Each month hundreds of unwanted dogs are rescued by the charity Many Tears. **Samantha Laurie** meets the fosterers who help them on their way to a happier life

This week, as most weeks, a white transit van will set off from Wales and drive up the M4, stopping at several different service stations on its way to Reading. At each stop a group of cars will gather in the bays like spies in a stake-out waiting for the drop. But its cargo is not packages nor parcels, but dogs, all breeds in all kinds of conditions, en route from the *Many Tears* rescue centre to the homes of a team of dog fosterers.

It's a vital link in a system that allows the centre to re-home 200 dogs each month. Each week 15 or more strays, ex-breeding dogs and unwanted puppies are boarded onto the foster van and taken to the volunteer fosterers for the days or weeks it takes to find a permanent home. Some will never have been in a home or had human contact before. Many are physically and emotionally traumatized. For the many ex-breeding dogs that have lived in outside pens all their lives, the foster home is often

the first taste of a home environment.

"For some it will be also the first time they've socialised with other dogs. It's a training ground to learn the skills they are going to need – walking on a lead, housetraining," says Sylvia VanAtta, who runs *Many Tears* with her husband Bill. *"It's also a chance for potential adopters to meet the dogs and for the centre to properly assess what kind of family a dog may be best suited to."*

Surrey is one of the most established and reliable networks of foster families for *Many Tears*, which runs the largest fostering operation in the UK. Some 21 families take in foster dogs in the county. Some have years of experience with dogs; others had never had a dog before in their lives. Some live abroad during the winter but love having a dog around when they are at home. Most volunteer having been moved by the often harrowing stories of the dogs' lives on the *Many Tears* websites.

This was the case for Frances Kerr, mum of four young children, in West Horsley, who started fostering a year ago. With two dogs and a horse of her own she instantly ticked the charity's boxes: she was experienced with dogs, outdoorsy and she was in and around much of the day.

"But for me there was one critical requirement – the dog would have to be bomb-proof around children," she says.

Her first placement was Rosie, a black collie cross, who had pitched up in a pound in Ireland and was a whisker's breath from being put down when *Many Tears* took her in. As with all of the dogs, Rosie was tested for tolerance to children (and cats) as part of her full medical check.

Rosie turned out to be a perfect match: good with the children and quick to learn house rules from the family's two German Shepherds. She stayed just three weeks before she found a new home. Frances believes that a houseful of children makes a big difference to potential adopters.

"If people are in any doubt about having a rescue dog around young children they can see for themselves how the dog copes in the chaos created by four under-10s."

Many Tears staff know the fosterers well and try to match the dog to a particular home. Sarah Thomas, who runs an East Molesey-based dog walking business, *K9 Walk Your Dog*, has an 11-year-old son and three dogs of her own. She mostly fosters large dogs, often ex-breeding bitches, and finds the more frightened and nervous dogs bond quickly with her boisterous brown male labrador, Rocco.

"Scared dogs always go to the strong dog for security. Sometimes you can't simply heap on affection, you have to wait until they've got the message from the others that this is a safe house," she comments.

House-training rarely takes more than a week for an older dog that can learn from the others. The ultimate reward, though, is watching the dogs learn to trust.

"It's that first time when they come and put their head on your lap," says Sarah. *"That's why I do it."*

The dog walking and dog day-care business means that hers is a busy, noisy household with lots of walks and activity. But older, infirm dogs may need a more peaceful and quiet environment. Some need a house where they are the only resident dog. There all kinds of dogs needing all types of foster homes.

"The hardest to place are Staffordshire Bull Terriers and Rottweilers but so, too, are cross-breeds, large dogs and strangely, black dogs," says Sylvia. *"Foster dogs rarely stay more than a month and popular breeds, such as Labradors and Cavaliers usually find a home within days."*

"I can't foster small, cute dogs – the children would never let them go!"

Fosterers need to be able to show that they are around most of the day and that they have a safe outside environment for the dog to play in. If they have dogs of their own these need to have been neutered. The centre provides food and

covers any vets bills, and the fosterers support each other, sharing transport and covering each other for holidays. If a dog does not settle in a foster home, the centre acts quickly to transfer the dog. Frances, who once had to hand back a collie that became overly dominant with her youngest child, says the centre was incredibly supportive and fast-acting.

They are also a critical link in the search for a permanent home, posting updates to the descriptions of the dogs on the website and meeting potential adopters.

"The fosterer always has the final approval on adopters," insists VanAtta.

The biggest challenge is letting go; watching a dog that has grown in confidence and health go to a new home.

"I never foster small, cute dogs or puppies, or the children would never allow me to let it go," laughs Kerr.

Others never quite make it through the

door – two of Thomas's own three dogs are "failed fosters" that she couldn't quite let go of. Sylvia VanAtta empathises.

"I'm a terrible example to them. I have 19 dogs that came indoors because they were unwell and have never left."



Local fosterers Sarah Thomas (top) and Frances Kerr

But for those that do leave for a happy, permanent home, the sense of having been such a stepping stone on the road to a better life is satisfaction indeed.

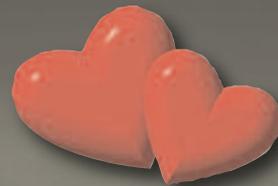
■ For further details on Many Tears, or if you're interested in fostering, tel: (01269) 843 084 or visit: www.manytearsrescue.com



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