

The Columbus Dispatch

Help on wheels: Ohio couple's carts help disabled dogs stay mobile

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Posted Apr 18, 2019 at 12:01 AM

Updated Apr 18, 2019 at 6:23 AM

GALION — John Lizotte approached the makeshift pen with caution because the German shepherd was in full-on guard-dog mode, his deep-throated bark of warning bouncing off the shelter walls.

John pulled a treat from the pouch strapped to his hip, stepped over the pen's low walls and crouched down. And something happened that amazed everyone who watched: Rex, the dog with the broken body and battered spirit, crawled as close to John as he could and cuddled up.

"His bark was all bluff," he said. "He just wanted to be loved."

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It was duty that brought John and Noel Lizotte to the Pickaway County Dog Shelter on April 5, summoned through the couple's nonprofit charity, Rescued Rollers. John refurbishes and outfits mobility carts — think tiny wheelchairs —

for dogs with disabilities and donates them to rescues and shelters to save animals otherwise likely destined for death.

Responding to a call for help from the shelter director, the Lizottes had traveled to Circleville to deliver a cart and its accessories to Rex, hoping it would make the poor boy adoptable.

For about four years now, the dog-wheelchair charity has been John's life's work and mission. People across the country donate old carts to him, and he raises about \$7,000 a year to pay for parts, etc. The cart is a lifetime gift, meaning that John expects it back when the dog dies or doesn't need it anymore, so it can be reused. He estimated that he has helped more than 300 dogs.

"These dogs are different, not less," he said. "If my son was paralyzed and used a wheelchair, I wouldn't just give up on him. These dogs deserve the same respect as humans."

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It was on March 25 that a couple spotted a dog lying in a field in north Circleville. They approached and found Rex alive, but barely. He was rail thin — probably 25 or 30 pounds under what he should be — and had atrophied muscle and no use of his back legs. Having dragged himself around for what a veterinarian later estimated could have been as long as two weeks, his hind quarters were raw and bloody. His ears were badly infected and his skin was burned and irritated from lying in his own urine.

The couple scooped him up and raced to the Pickaway County Dog Shelter.

"We didn't even bring him inside. We loaded him in our van and went right to the vet," Dog Warden Sherri Rarey said. "We didn't know if he could be saved or not."

Rarey said the veterinarian determined that Rex's leg injury was an old one, likely recently re-aggravated. The doctor didn't think he was in much pain, so he prescribed antibiotics and steroids. Rarey knew Rex wouldn't do well among the chaos of the row upon row of cages in the back of the shelter, so employees made a makeshift pen for him in the lobby.

"We figured out right away that Rex was a smart, smart dog," Rarey said, growing emotional as she recalled those first few days. "You could tell he was very thankful that he was saved."

The staff rigged up a beach towel as a sling to support Rex's back legs — he would whine to tell them when he needed to go out — to do his business. Not ideal, Rarey said, but doable.

How, though, could anyone care for him long-term, Rarey wondered. No one wanted to euthanize him, but could Rex be helped? A Google search led her to Rescued Rollers. John responded to her inquiry almost immediately, and Rarey sent him a series of detailed measurements.

A few days later, the Lizottes loaded up their Ford pickup with the intent to fit the cart and sling (that cinches a dog's belly to make it liftable) on Rex as their latest successful mission and call it a day.

Rex, though, had other ideas.

"From the moment we got there, he wouldn't take his eyes off my wife and I," said John, 52, a one-time police officer and phone-company employee whose dream was always to open a sanctuary for senior and special-needs dogs. He and Noel, 51, have their own special-needs dogs now, along with a few cats and some parrots.

He said most dogs don't take to a cart very quickly, but Rex proved to be a natural.

While in the parking lot, Noel opened the truck's tailgate to get herself a bottle of water and Rex, already standing beside her, tried to climb up.

“We looked at Sherri said, ‘I guess that’s it. Rex is going home with us,’ ” said John, his voice cracking just a bit and his eyes tearing up as he recalled the moment.

On the two-hour ride back north to Galion in Morrow County, Rex stretched his long body from the back seat to alternately rest his head on John and Noel’s shoulders.

“He’s a Velcro dog,” John said. “Stuck to our sides.”

John keeps Rex in his cart for only 20 minutes or so at a time, a few times a day. They play in the backyard or take short walks through the neighborhood.

Rex remains medically fragile but is getting stronger. John hopes he will one day walk without the cart again.

“We didn’t choose Rex,” he said with a smile. “Rex chose us.”

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