

Beth Goldstein loves life with her furry friend, Paulie

A Home for Paulie

Saving Sugar Land's Pets

Written by Sarah Tucker Select Photos by Marisa Hugonnett

Beth Goldstein still remembers the day when Paul Anka, a Dachshund-Chihuahua mix, showed up on her family's back porch in Sugar Land. At first, the Goldsteins resisted Paulie's charm. They posted signs and fliers around the neighborhood and visited local vets, but nobody recognized him. After keeping him for two weeks, they gave him up to a no-kill shelter in Houston. "He was trained and a lap dog - he was everything I wanted in another dog, if I had wanted one," Goldstein says. She soon realized how much she missed her furry friend and returned to the shelter to bring him home for good. Now, she can't go anywhere in her house without Paulie following her or jumping in her lap. Paulie's charm has worn off, and Goldstein now insists she could never want another dog other than him. "He's a great dog," she says. "The unconditional love is incredible."

More and more Sugar Land families are finding their four-legged friends in unconventional places like animal shelters, instead of in kennels at the pet store, giving abandoned pets not only a loving, forever home, but also a second chance.

Part of the Family

Susan Biondi of Sugar Land is also familiar with pet adoptions - all three of her family's dogs have come from shelters. "We didn't decide to adopt three at once," she says. "Our first dog was a found dog. And once you have a rescue dog, it's hard to imagine taking any other dog." The Biondis' three dogs, Rosco, Oliver, and Louie, were adopted separately from shelters in the Houston area. Oliver is a scruffy-looking terrier mix, and both Louie and Rosco are poodle-bichons. With each dog, the attraction was mutual and immediate. "When my son spotted Oliver, it was love at first sight," Biondi says. "We had already been to so many shelters, but when he saw Oliver, he stopped looking."

Biondi admits that having three kids and three dogs is "over the top sometimes," and likens it to having six kids. "But I can't imagine a house without a dog. I think that dogs offer unconditional love and companionship. They nurture the sensitivity that's in all of us," she says.

Pet Parents Needed

Unfortunately, for every animal adopted by families like the Biondis, there are even more living on the streets as strays or in shelters, waiting for their chance. Kathryn Ketchum, manager of Sugar Land Animal Services, agrees that the statistics are grim. "Unfortunately, it's a really, really sad thing for the entire country. Four million animals make it into shelters, and only 2 million make it out. It's sad to think of the numbers," she says.

Fortunately, there are local organizations working to change this statistic. Save Our Strays Fort Bend, a non-profit animal rescue organization founded by Susan Culver and Sharon Rode, is dedicated to saving animals from being euthanized at over-burdened area shelters. Save Our Strays has been working tirelessly with Fort Bend Animal Control to increase pet adoption rates in Fort Bend County, as well as campaign for the building of a bigger and better shelter in 2011. "The fate of these animals is that they would be killed if we didn't take them," says Dana Sterry, a volunteer in charge of cat adoptions with the organization.

The Adoption Process

All animals at Sugar Land Animal Services are put up for adoption after being fully vetted and undergoing a behavioral analysis. Potential pet owners fill out a form indicating what they're looking for in a pet and have a one-on-one conversation with volunteers at the shelter. Sugar Land Animal Services doesn't allow adopted animals to be returned, but they do offer a "sleep over" program to see if an animal will be a good fit. "We go out of our way to see what kind of animal will work best. The sleep over program gives some people a good reality check to see if they're ready for a pet," says Ketchum.

The process at Save Our Strays is similar, with adoption events held every month at various locations. Volunteers foster animals in their homes to get them ready for adoption. "Because we foster in our house, we can tell their personalities," says Sterry. "We can put the right cat or dog personality into the right households." For households like the Biondis and Goldsteins, adopting a rescue animal means not only providing a loving home to a pet in need, but also welcoming a new member of the family. **SLM**

SARAH TUCKER is a freelance writer and life-long resident of Sugar Land. A recent college graduate, she plans to attend graduate school to study journalism.

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