



BE AWARE OF DOG

FEARFUL BUT FRIENDLY,
HANDSOME DAN'S STORY MIGHT CHANGE YOUR MIND
ABOUT PIT BULL TYPE DOGS.

BY FRANK CHRUPCALA

Rescued from the ugly world of dog fighting, Handsome Dan has found a new home and a new life away from Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels.

The pit bull, one of over 50 dogs found on the NFL quarterback's Virginia estate in April 2007, now lives in Cranston, R.I., with a new family. His owners, Heather Gutshall, CPDT-KA, and Mark Stoutzenberger, continue to tackle the challenge of saving abused, neglected canines with rescue and training programs.

"We're changing people's minds about pit bull types and helping some of the area's neediest dogs," Gutshall, a certified professional dog trainer, said. "This is our life."

Gutshall and Stoutzenberger, co-founders of Handsome Dan's Rescue for Pit Bull Type Dogs, have been rescuing, training and rehabilitating mistreated dogs for many years. The couple also operates Outbound Hounds, offering private training using the least invasive and minimally aversive (LIMA) methods, group classes, pet sitting, park trips and day care. Gutshall and Stoutzenberger have dedicated their lives to canine causes.

After being rescued from Vick's illegal dog fighting ring, Handsome Dan and 21 other "Victory" dogs went to the Best Friends Animal Society in Utah, the nation's largest sanctuary for abused and abandoned animals. Dan was fearful and malnourished, having been chained to a buried car axle in the back of Vick's property for most of his life. In 2009, after the sanctuary's extensive screening and approval process, Gutshall and Stoutzenberger visited the sanctuary, met Dan and fell in love. "We thought, we can help this dog and there are not many that can," Gutshall said. "So we picked him. After one night with him, we knew he was our dog."

Now, after a few years of the couple's expert, loving care, Dan is overcoming his past and living a happy life. It is an ongoing process, according to Gutshall, but he has adjusted to his new home in Cranston with the couple, their son, Cam, their young daughter, Josephine, and their cattle dog, Ocean. When he is not cuddled up on the couch, he coexists with the many dogs that come and go at Handsome Dan's Rescue and Outbound Hounds, as well.

"Dan is a totally normal dog in his own environment," Stoutzenberger said. "He has his own routine, he has no human aggression and he's good with most other dogs."

The "Vicktory" dogs prove that there is no such thing as a lost cause. The prominence of the Vick scandal has increased awareness of both the problem of dog fighting and the solution for its victims. The new standard set by the case is to individually evaluate and rehabilitate the victims of dog fighting rather than to simply euthanize them, as was done in the past.

Handsome Dan's Rescue dogs often require extensive medical care, rehabilitation and training. Most, like Dan, have been rescued from severe neglect or abuse, but Gutshall and Stoutzenberger never back down from a challenge.

"We take dogs that otherwise would never get adopted," Stoutzenberger said. "Dogs that are not good candidates for adoption because of behavioral or medical reasons."

Handsome Dan's Rescue is small by design, but its impact is large. Offering training and behavioral support to foster, shelter and newly adopted dogs from both their program and others, they help countless canines throughout the area. Gutshall teaches the Association of Pet Dog Trainers' Canine Life and Social Skills (C.L.A.S.S.) class at Roger Williams Park, preparing pit bull dogs living in foster homes or shelters for adoption. Through a select, exclusive network, they provide foster homes for dogs previously considered unadoptable. Volunteer enrichment specialists also help dogs that are still in shelters with one-on-one sessions.

In addition to training and adoption services, Handsome Dan's Rescue also assists owners with the cost of spays and neuters and has even provided funds for life-saving surgeries. Though they offer many services and programs, their daily dedication to dogs that would otherwise have nothing is their most rewarding. Handsome Dan's Rescue's recently completed holiday drive collected enough Kong toys stuffed with peanut butter for every dog in a shelter in the state.

"We truly believe we're running the best program," Gutshall said. "People know the history of our dogs. Many have been living in a home, not a kennel, and they have been evaluated and trained by the best specialists in the state."

Gutshall and Stoutzenberger take great pride in their work, knowing that it is no easy task. Helping the dogs that need it the most has "become a part of our life, and there's no escaping it now," according to Gutshall.

"We have an amazing job," Stoutzenberger said. "But it's hard work that requires constant attention."

Though Gutshall and Stoutzenberger put in the time and effort, Handsome Dan's Rescue relies greatly on help from the local community. They know that contributions from volunteers and supporters are crucial to the success of their program.

"People from across the state, the nation and around the world have been amazingly generous," Gutshall said. "Not only with funds, but other supplies and support and encouragement as well. It's unbelievably humbling."



For more information on Handsome Dan's Rescue for Pit Bull Type Dogs, visit their Facebook page. For more on Outbound Hounds, visit www.obhounds.com or call 401-338-2590. They do not accept owner surrenders, but can offer advice and training through Outbound Hounds.