

The rewards and challenges of fostering animals



By Bill Kilpatrick

In part two of Bancroft This Week's series on Home Again we sat down with some local foster parents to hear about the rewards and challenges of fostering dogs and cats, why they do it, and what it means to be an effective foster parent for animals. One thing that became clear speaking to Christine Walker, the president of Home Again animal rescue, was that fostering is a fluid volunteer position and that there is no such thing as a 'typical' foster. 'We have what we call 'foster failures,' where people end up adopting the animal and stop fostering,' she explained, 'People come and go? sometimes it is one-offs, some people get emotionally burnt out, sometimes they're just going on vacation, [and] some people do it seasonally,' said Walker. However, said Walker, the 'gold standard' of a pet foster is a couple who have no kids and no pets and who are experienced enough to take all types, shapes, and sizes of animals with all kinds of issues. Walker, who is one of Home Again's longest fosters of over 11 years, mainly focuses on fostering dogs and that's where her main knowledge base is, especially dogs with behavioural issues. Walker was quick to point out that they do not generally just put a rescue dog in anyone's house, it's a matter of finding the right match for the right foster and many fosters are specific about the types of dogs they prefer and are comfortable with. 'There's big dog fosters, small dog fosters, medium size fosters, some people like certain breeds, and certain genders,' she explained, 'You get some people who don't want puppies or kittens for that matter or some who are willing to take dogs with medical needs and/or injuries.' Walker outlined some of the pit falls that new fosters often fall into. 'A lot of people lead with love and that is absolutely fabulous with a lot of dogs, but with other dogs it can be extremely detrimental.' Walker pointed out that often they receive animals with little or no information about their background or behaviour, which is why it's important when welcoming a new dog to not cause something called 'stress stacking.' She emphasized how important it is to not cause more stress and anxiety to an animal that has just arrived in a new home, and why it's critical to just leave them alone for the first little bit and let them acclimatize. She spoke about how some people want to begin interacting with the animals immediately, but, she added, until the animals are comfortable and sure that they are in a safe and secure environment, that desire that people have to indulge the animal can backfire and result in behavioural issues. So, what she recommends is that people initially just go about their normal routine and let the animal adapt and observe its environment and the

intentions of those within it. Walker warned about the importance of respecting your new pet's boundaries and why it's critical to not force the animal to try and adapt quickly. However, once the animal does begin to open up, says Walker, it's just as important to provide leadership and boundaries for the animal so it feels more secure. Walker said that problems can often result from people being too strict and placing unrealistic expectations on an animal in terms of behaviour change, and subsequently problems also occur when people don't create any boundaries and allow too much leeway. What the animals need, she explained, is a leader who can create a structured, predictable, and safe environment with clear boundaries. "We are all creatures of habit," she said, "and dogs very much are too," and this is where personalities of both the animals and fosters come into play. "It boils down to that you need the right match," she said and one of the keys to being an effective match for an animal is the ability and desire to put the animal's needs first. Robin and Greg St. Croix have been seasonal dog fosters for over 11 years and for them it's an honour and a privilege to be a dog foster. According to Greg they have a 99 per cent adoption success rate. "We've only had one dog in 11 years come back," he said, adding that the reason their success rate is so high is because, "it's always about the animal here." Greg works unpredictable and long hours and during the winter his partner prefers the warm and sunny south, so they take a break from fostering over the winter because they know that Greg alone cannot effectively meet the needs of the dogs. For 11 years it's worked for them and their fosters and they don't plan on giving it up anytime soon, "We're hoping to do this for another 20 years," said Greg. Their success is a result of a number of things from the fact that they have no other pets or children, to their thoughtful and planned approach toward their animals. "Hope is not a plan here," he emphasized adding "You can't have good days and bad days. Everyday has to be a good day. It's not fair to the dog." Greg's advice for those wanting to be a successful foster is that they should have a basic understanding of animals behaviour, have patience, and be prepared for the worst and accept the best, but most importantly know what you're getting into: dogs will urinate and defecate on your floor; it's not their fault, but if you don't like that then don't foster. While it's clear that both Greg and Robin care deeply for their pets they refuse to be foster failures, "People say to us, 'don't you love these dogs? Isn't it hard to get rid of them?' No," says Greg, "it's just the opposite. We get to love them and give them to somebody who will love them even more for longer. It's about being dedicated and focused for the betterment of the dog." Home Again foster Dannielle Switzer has a motto, "I say, 'my heart breaks so their doesn't have to again,'" and she has certainly shed some tears during her five years as a dog foster, but her passion and love for her animals is what keeps her going. "Your mental health does take a toll at times," she said, "but that's a part of fostering. You have to be strong enough to say we can't [keep them.]" Switzer says that often where people go wrong is they put their feelings before the needs of the animal, "for every person who says they can't do it, we're not thinking about you we're thinking about the animals." Like the St. Croix's, Switzer always puts her animals first and she emphasized how important it is to get to know your foster's personality. "We look to fit a dog into your lifestyle," she said. Part of that process is watching how the dogs behave around children, potential adoptive families, other animals, and around other dogs. Despite some challenging fosters, who came with behaviour issues, Switzer said that fostering has become part of her life now, "That's the great thing about fostering. You get to see all of their personalities - some you wouldn't want in your house for any length of time- but they're fun. I would never not foster now." Mary Leigh Akkerman has been fostering cats for over two years and recently took over the position of cat coordinator after the sudden passing of Clarice Sniderman-Smith, and if there is one thing about Akkerman, it's that she loves animals. She has six cats of her own, is fostering another eight cats, and also has three dogs. "I just love animals," she said "and they always need help." She touched on many of the points that the dog fosters touched on regarding the responsibility and commitment that it takes to be a foster, "These are your fur babies," she said, "they don't have a voice. You have to be their voice. If you don't think of them as your children then why adopt?" She highlighted some important things to know about cats as well regarding their personalities when it comes to finding one that fits your lifestyle. Often, but not always, male cats are more affectionate than female cats, kittens who squirm will most likely not be cuddly adult cats, and if you want an outdoor cat that stays close to home, get a female cat because male cats like to wander. One of the common themes that all the fosters emphasized was how they all support one another to ensure both a successful fostering experience and a successful adoption. "We are always looking for volunteers that care about these animals," said Akkerman who highlighted some of the benefits of fostering which is that Home Again takes care of everything. Food, veterinarian bills, spay or neutering and if anything happens to your animals while our animals are in your care, we take care of that too. So, people should have no fear if something happens." Akkerman and Walker said that they are receiving multiple emails per day of people looking to rehouse their pets and that they are always looking for more volunteer fosters. For more information on fostering or how to get tickets for their current fundraiser where the top prize is a \$5,000 travel voucher, email Home Again at info@homeagainbancroft.ca or call 613-334-8471. Or to view pets that are up for adoption visit homeagainbancroft.ca/