

Her Name is Pepper....

By John Visconti, Rescue Reporter

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She has lived with five different owners and at two shelters.

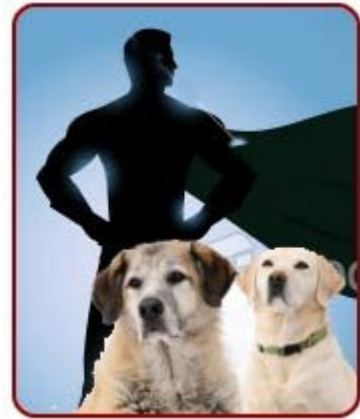
She was abandoned by her original owners approximately 15 miles from her home. After living an undetermined amount of time on the street as a stray, she was seized by the police in Sept of 2007 and brought to a municipal shelter. The only ID she carried was a rabies tag on her tattered collar. Through the tag ID number, the shelter identified her owners and made repeated unsuccessful attempts to contact them.

After a few weeks at the shelter, she was adopted by an elderly man in West Islip. One week later she was returned, essentially abandoned again, due to being heart worm positive and because of "behavioral issues".

Because the shelter was a municipal shelter, with limited funds, she was not long for this world, She would have been euthanized as the shelter lacked the funds to treat her heart worm problem. With 48 hours to live, she was rescued by another shelter.

Unfortunately, as happens with many dogs in many shelters, in the new shelter she was not given the consistent, structured daily attention and training that dogs need to flourish. Training methods, when used, were aversive and "correction" based. She was walked with a choke collar even though one of the good things about her was her leash walking skills. The shelter claimed they used chokers because they were the most secure method for walking the dogs which is pure nonsense. Allowing untrained volunteers to use chokers on dogs simply isn't a good idea.

As a volunteer at the shelter, I got to know her.



Same dog, new life

At that time, she rarely made eye contact with me and was clearly in a downward spiral. I would sneak a clicker into the shelter (lest the shelter clicker police would descend upon me and banish me) and work with her when we were out of sight.

I often heard shelter workers say "That dog needs to get out of here" Her decline was that noticeable.

My good friend and future dog trainer, Matt, who worked at the shelter said "They were dark days for her and I knew it. I knew that each day was a struggle for her just to exist. I knew that each day she became more and more unhappy and hopeless. I know this may sound crazy and strange, but every time I touched her I could feel the unbearable pain she was in, like it was transmitted from her body into mine. I use to try and pet the sadness out of her."

Through it all I could see that she was still reachable. She'd blow up over something and in the middle of her theatrics, I'd ask her to sit and while barking and carrying on, she would do so.

One day, upon my arrival, I went to her kennel to walk her. A shelter worker said "I just placed her food bowl down. So maybe if you come back in five minutes or so, she'll be ready"

I told him that I thought she'd want to go for a walk and the food could wait.

His response was "If she leaves her food to come to you, it'll be the first time I've seen a dog do that"

30 seconds later, she and I were walking together, a half-eaten bowl of food left behind in her kennel.

At that time, she was body touch sensitive; a resource guarder; reactive toward men; highly reactive toward other dogs; reactive to trucks; thunder phobic; suffered from separation anxiety; and she was an avid hole digger. The only cues she knew were "sit" and "come" (which she always felt was nothing more than an optional request to be adhered to or not based on her schedule) And just as a bonus, she had been diagnosed with Hepatitis.

I decided she was the perfect dog to adopt.

In May of 2009, I did so.

Everything didn't exactly go smoothly during our first few months at home. While lunging at another dog who was some 150+ feet away, she tore the cartilage in my right knee (since surgically repaired); she bit me twice (she didn't break skin because she had acquired a great bite inhibition at some time in her early life); tore down the screen door to my backyard; and tore down three sets of blinds. She was so bad with guests that I had to leash her up and take her out to stand on the front lawn with me as my guests entered the house. She'd lunge, bark, snarl at them the entire time. When she and I reentered my home, everyone had clear instructions not to look at her, not to face her and not to acknowledge her in anyway. While still on leash, every time she looked at a guest, I'd reward her with food. We clearly needed to do some serious altering of her wiring.

I'm pretty sure my family might have thought my adoption of her was an even crazier idea than when, as a kid, I decided to set the world's duration record for kite flying. I launched my kite, noted the time and then went to bed with the string tied to my wrist. I woke up the following morning to discover half the neighborhood connected, cars, lawn mowers, TV antennas, trees, by hundreds upon hundreds of feet of kite string.

"Isn't that wonderful" I'm sure they thought, "he adopted a mountain lion."

There were times I felt "oh my, what have I done" As bad as she was at the shelter, she was worse in my home. The problem behaviors seemed as if they'd be with us forever. I often reached out to my incomparable mentor and sometimes training partner, Mira (who referred to my new dog as a "freak show") for sanity checks.

But I continually reminded myself that over the course of two years, she had developed coping mechanisms that worked for her in a shelter environment. I also reminded myself to respect the way she handled her fears because until I helped her learn new methods, she had no other options. And I always respected the fact that for her, those fears were very real.

Today, 18 months later, Pepper is a well behaved, wonderful friend.



As evidence, I present the picture above. The kennel card is hers from her shelter days. You'll notice that the card states she could not be adopted by any family with kids under 16 years of age. To the left of the kennel card is my niece hand feeding her. Pepper is fabulous with kids.

As another piece of evidence, I present the picture at right. The two guys in the picture are fun, smart fellas that we meet on our morning walks. The man in the orange vest and Pepper didn't get along well upon first meeting (can a "first meeting" go on for five months?) She'd lunge at him, air bite near his hand. I was fairly convinced that at some point, I'd be sued by a passerby. Today, she is buddies with him. How did it happen? Every time we encountered them, I'd hand her orange vested nemesis treats to give to her. At first, he did so from a distance (like Providence Rhode Island) dropping them on the ground. Within a few months she was eating right out of his hand.

The shelter veterinarian as well as my veterinarian both insisted that she wear a muzzle for examinations. In fact, her initial shelter examination report states, "Dog would not allow examination of hind quarters" Muzzle wearing is now officially a thing of the past. In



fact, my veterinarian marveled at how much she had changed and as a result has referred training customers to me. Imagine that. Pepper is so well behaved that she gets me referrals.

She has learned dozens of cues and while she still has some issues with the mailman, I can't think of anything more rewarding than how we have learned about each other and what it has felt like to see her trust build in me one day at a time. I admire how hard she has worked to follow my lead and am flattered that she trusts me enough to do so. I marvel at her resilience. Mostly, I am thankful that through our work together, she has allowed me to feel the greatest sense of accomplishment I have felt in my life.

I often tell her that we're both lucky that I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I brought her home.

We're both lucky because I can't imagine life without us being best friends.

To see Pepper in action, go to my [website](http://johnvisconti.com), johnvisconti.com and click on "Pepper: A Success Story"

