

Muttville Senior Dog Rescue: A Special Interview With Sherri Franklin

By Dr. Karen Becker

KB: Dr. Karen Becker

SF: Sherri Franklin

KB: Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker. I have a great guest with me. I'm so honored that Sherri Franklin, from Muttville Senior Dog Rescue, is joining me. Some of you have probably read the article that I wrote about the amazing work that she's doing. I was so inspired by reading about her that I contacted her and asked her to please swing by for a quick interview. Sherri, thank you so much for joining us.

SF: Well, thank you for having me.

KB: I'm so excited to be having you.

SF: And helping me get to really spread the word and the gospel of senior dogs makes me very happy.

KB: It's a good one. Back up and tell people who don't know your story, about how you fell in love with the double-digit dogs, as I like to say. What was your introduction to this amazing group of dogs who are oftentimes overlooked in the shelter system?

SF: For me, it all started when I started volunteering at an animal shelter about 25 years ago. I fell in love with this beagle-y – I don't know – basset-y girl who arrived at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) where I was dog walking. She was about 8 years old. She wasn't, to me, that old. She was wagging her tail. She was so fun. I walked her.

In fact, I went there every day before my real job to walk to make sure she got out for a walk. One day I came in and she wasn't there. I thought, "That's so great. She got adopted." I asked about her and she had been euthanized. She had been euthanized because she had been there too long. She'd been passed over for all the younger dogs. I was devastated to find that out. On that day, I vowed that I would do something about that. I just couldn't believe it because I started to see the pattern.

I started taking a dog home every single week or two weeks and find her a new home. I realized it was a big problem. I realized I could find homes for them too, so that's what I did. I decided to start a non-profit. It was a lot of work. Every day I learned something new about how to start a non-profit that made me think, "I'm not going to do this. I can't do this. It's too hard." But every day, I got one more thing done. I started a non-profit in 2007 to rescue senior dogs. There's no turning back. There really isn't. We've saved over 6,000 dogs at Muttville and found them all great homes.

KB: So wonderful and so inspiring, really. So inspiring. For me, I grew up in a kill shelter. But for me, older dogs are an obvious choice for busy working people, because their personalities are

clear. You know, when you get puppies, you're kind of responsible for a lot of forming, making sure that you're doing everything right. Older dogs are who they are. I think that that transparency is such a blessing to people who need [inaudible 03:36]. They're looking for a dog that fits a specific type of lifestyle. Older dogs provide clear, transparent proof of who they are, which I think is oftentimes why people are afraid to adopt older dogs for lots of reasons.

What are some of the – I don't want to say excuses, Sherri – But what are some of the common things you hear people why they don't want to adopt senior dogs? Maybe they're afraid they're going to get sick or there's not much time left? What are some of the most common things that you run into?

SF: People first come in and they might think, "Oh. I don't want to get an older dog. I lost my dog and I just don't want to go through that again. It's going to be too hard too fast." Really, the truth is that you go in – When you adopt an older dog, you go in knowing that your time may be limited.

People tell me over and over again how rewarding it is to feel like every moment counts. You've got an older dog. Every moment is precious. You learn to live in the moment. I feel so rewarded in being able to give an older dog that second chance at happiness. I feel rewarded but at the same time as the dog is absolutely getting that second chance in getting so much love.

We have adopters who have adopted from us time and time again. They said they'd never go back to a young dog. They love the soulfulness and the ease that an older dog has right away, right when the dog comes into your life. You know that they know who's buttering their bread. They actually know you're rescuing them. They reward you every day.

KB: Sherri, with the thousands of dogs that you have helped find homes, probably second and third homes for some of these dogs, is there a recurrent theme? Do their owners die? I'm sure it's a myriad of different backgrounds. But is it primarily that their owners die or divorce? Is there any type of classic scenario that you're rescuing these dogs from? Or are they all from different backgrounds?

SF: You know, all of our dogs do come from different backgrounds. But there are a few themes that we do see. Some of them are extremely sad. Somebody's gone into a nursing home and can't take their beloved pet with them. Some people have passed away and their family members can't care for the dog. But we also see people moving and landlord issues. We see people having babies and they don't want to have their dog anymore. We have actually seen people decide they want to get a puppy and they just don't want to keep their older dog.

Some come from extremely loving homes and have never known anything but love in their lives. And then we have others who have lived in a backyard their whole life. Both need love equally. It's really – Actually, I use that as a marking tool because there are people like me who want to take the saddest, the worst-case scenario. They want to rescue. They're rescuers. They're rescuers at heart. And then you have others – Like a family that wants a family dog that's always been loved. You get the people who really want to get a dog that they know has come from a family, that's gotten lots of love.

I use both those examples because, literally, those are the two different sides we get. We get the dogs that have had no love and need it, and we have the dogs that have gotten so much love, and they need it. All of our dogs need love. All of our senior dogs need love.

KB: Do you see, Sherri, compared to younger dogs, do you see a period when these dogs first come into rescue that there is a shock? Do you see – Because they're older, is their period to work through being overwhelmed a little bit longer or are you really quite shocked at how resilient some of these older guys are?

SF: I can tell you that I'm very shocked at how resilient dogs are in general. We've really set up Muttville where our shelter is very home-like. When the dogs first arrive, we don't have kennels. We try and really sort of recreate a home environment. Most of our dogs, some of them might take 24 hours, 48 hours to warm up. But I have to tell you, so many times I get a dog in and I'm like, "Oh my god. This dog wants to attack everybody. It wants to attack all the other dogs," and 48 hours later, this dog is crawling in your lap, just begging for love.

Dogs, I think they know. I think they know when they're safe. At Muttville, we really try and create a place that feels very safe to the dogs, and actually the humans that come to visit them too.

KB: Yeah. That is wonderful. When you were – When you kind of inadvertently fell into starting a non-profit, it wasn't like you set out to do this. But you stepped up. You saw a need and you started this magnificent organization. How did you decide what is old? What's the criteria? Because for some breeds, older is a little bit younger, and then there are some breeds that are longer-lived. How do you define old? Because some people call me old, which I get, but it's all relative. I feel old sometimes. It's all relative.

SF: I think some mornings I feel really old, and then some days I feel really young. I agree with you. But I got asked this question just this morning, when somebody came and said, "What made you choose 7?" Because I actually said, "Okay. We're going to dogs 7 and older. We're going to consider those dogs to be senior dogs."

That is because at the shelter where I have volunteered – At this point, I've probably volunteered 15 years – dogs that were 7 got passed by. I don't know. Dogs that were younger or jumpier, bouncier and were begging for attention in the kennels, they would use to get adopted. I chose 7 and older. Now, if somebody calls in a Great Dane or a Mastiff, then we feel like, "Oh. We might take a 5-year-old Great Dane, because obviously their life expectancy is quite a bit shorter than a Chihuahua or a poodle mix that can live to 18. I chose 7. I still feel very good about that choice.

KB: What's the oldest dog that you've adopted?

SF: We've had some real oldies. We had a 19-year-old Jack Russell.

KB: Ohh.

SF: Yeah. I know. His name was Goofy, and he was goofy. He would run around. He was so fun. I loved taking him to the beach. But we get 17- and 18-year-old dogs. Our average age is 10. I like

to say that when I don't know how old they are, I say they're 10. Because we get a lot of 7-year-olds and a lot of 12-year-olds. And then everything in between.

But we don't have a cutoff age-wise. We are open to taking older dogs. We definitely want to look at quality of life. We do believe in euthanasia as a gift to an animal that's suffering. If we have an 18-year-old that is really not having a good time at life anymore, we aren't afraid to have that discussion possibly with an owner-surrenderer or within our team to decide whether a dog – An 18-year-old older dog probably is not really enjoying life anymore. We do believe that euthanasia can be a gift at that point. We also did a 17-year-old dog in Horowitz that's happy and interacting with every dog and every person. Those dogs find homes.

KB: It's just wonderful. I have to ask. Is the need substantially greater than the service you can provide? I guess I just look back to my time in the shelter. We never had enough cages. The need for adoptive families was far, far, far greater than what we could provide. I'm assuming you're in the same situation.

SF: As Muttville has become more well-known, we get more and more requests. I mean I dream of the day when we'd have to go looking for senior dogs to add to our shelter. But we have not had that happen. I don't know that I'll be around for that to happen. But I do have to tell you we get in about 20 to 25 dogs every week. We adopt out 20 to 25 dogs every week. I like to think that the need is great, but people are also stepping up to adopt this much. Hopefully there becomes a balance.

KB: Have you had other people doing rescue around the country, or maybe even the world, call and ask how you're doing it? Because it is, typically speaking, shelters do struggle with older animals. Are you giving advice to other people doing rescue how to help out?

SF: Our whole strategic plan is to – I don't want to make Muttvilles around, but I want to spread the word, the gospel, Muttville, senior dogs and how we do it. I've spoken at the Humane Society of the United States, HSUS, their animal expo. I'm speaking again this year at the expo as well to talk about how we market, how we – I like to say – make senior dogs sexy. That's what we do.

KB: Exactly. I was going to say that, and I thought that may come off as really weird. But I was going to say, "You make senior dogs as enticing." People open their minds to think about doing something that they otherwise wouldn't have, because you're giving them literally food for thought, which is awesome.

SF: That's exactly what we do. We've tried to be innovative every step of the game in just learning what we've learned in the past 11 years on what works and what doesn't. It's not cookie cutter for every dog. Some dogs need to be adopted by a rescue-type person that wants to rescue. Other dogs need to be more ready for a very perfect home that want specific dogs.

We really try. We learn from our mistakes. We learn from our successes. We also are working on a lot of different programs. We have a hospice program, which has really taken off and been extremely successful in finding homes for our dogs that maybe don't have as long to live or are suffering from an inoperable condition.

We have interns that come. They learn what we're doing, and they take it back to their shelter. I just feel like there's so much people can be doing and so much people can learn and want to be doing these things. We want to put it out there. We want to push it out.

KB: So great. You've had actually some, I think, some wonderful success in – I'm going to say special needs, older dogs and kind of physically high-maintenance older dogs. Those are back when I was doing shelter work full-time. Those were dogs that were automatically euthanized because they were just too much work. But you're also shifting the mindset with those, just as you and I are going to become higher maintenance the older we get.

SF: Right?

KB: Or any other beloved in our family. Things get harder, not easier. You're helping to rearrange pet lovers' mindsets around. That task is a blessed burden that we can take on and do it excellently. Help us understand how you shifted mindsets when it comes to more special needs older animals.

SF: Like I said, I think that every animal, every dog anyway, has the right person for it. Sometimes it does take a little longer. It is a little more challenging. But my favorite dog was – I mean he's still my favorite dog. His name was Spanky. When we got him, he was dragging his back legs. He had urine burns all over him. He needed to be expressed because he couldn't urinate on his own.

We got him wheels. We called him "Spanky Hotwheels," because he would run. He was so full of joy that he could finally get somewhere. He would run everywhere. We'd express him. I actually, right now, I love expressing things because it feels so rewarding. But we try to do things a little differently here by turning that into a positive.

I mean, gosh, if you have to express your dog, you'd know he's not going to have mistakes anywhere, because you're going to actually put him somewhere to express him, so his urine comes out where you want it to, in the yard, in the garden. Just the joy of seeing an animal that hasn't really been able to walk be able to walk, and go – I mean, literally – on a mile-long walk, because he's got wheels. How if you want to meet new people, the best way you can possibly meet new people is to walk one of these dogs that has wheels on.

We just talk about how positive the experience can be instead of turning it into just a hardship. It doesn't have to be a hardship. It can be something really fun and really rewarding and enjoyable. We try and always put a positive spin on our story. Even if the dog came from some place really bad, we want to be hopeful. I think hope sells. I think positive stories sell. I think that Muttville from day 1 always talked about these animals in a real positive way, instead of in a negative way. I think that's what attracts so many adopters to us.

KB: So great, so great. You have a great team of volunteers.

SF: Oh my god. Yes.

KB: We need to talk a little bit about the fact that you are an amazing human being, but you're not doing it all yourself. You've got people who have caught the vision. They've caught your vision.

SF: Right. We have about 300 volunteers. We have about 75 foster homes. You know, maybe 50 of them are active all the time. The others, if there's a fire or a disaster, we're going to help in a hurricane. People come out of the woodwork. Our old foster families say, "I want to help too." We have a lot of great volunteers. I also have a staff here. I know I started on my own in my house, but I couldn't deal without our fabulous staff that really make things run. An adoption manager, we have a foster care volunteer manager. These people really, really help us get these dogs in and out, or we just couldn't do it.

But we're all about, "Everything's positive." We try and make a great match. If somebody is to bring a dog back, we don't judge them about that either. I think it's really about making what we do, dog rescue, accessible to everybody, so nobody has to be afraid of coming to a dog rescue or an animal shelter. That they're going to be treated with respect. That they're going to have somebody there to help them and help them find the right animal.

We have volunteers who walk every dog at least two or three times a day. I mean people are devoted to old dogs. If you start an animal rescue, a senior dog rescue, I guarantee you, there are people who want to help. We really struck a chord with the general population, because guess what? We all get old.

KB: It's common for all of us. Do unto others as you want to have done unto you. We need to take very special care of all of our senior mammals. We can gain insights from all of these older creatures in our lives, for sure. For sure. Sherri, if you could impart some words of wisdom, or maybe this is the very first time anyone's ever thought or knew that Muttville Senior Dog Rescue exists, what would be some words of wisdom that you would share?

SF: Well, I think there are two things that I always say to myself. One thing is to never say never. Don't ever say, "That dog is never going to find a good home." Don't say, "I can never do this." I live by the fact, "Don't ever say never." Because things change and people come out and people can help.

The other thing I'd like to say is, "Always ask." People go, "How did you get this started?" I asked. I asked for help in every way, shape and form. I asked for help in starting the non-profit. I asked for help for financial help, to help us build what we have. Don't be afraid to ask. Remember that you're asking for the animals. You're not asking for yourself. You don't have to put your ego in there, because you're really asking for what you believe in. If it's dogs or cats or homeless people, whatever it is, if you're asking for something to help, it shouldn't be about you. You will get a lot more "yes" answers than you would if you never asked at all.

KB: Yeah. Inspiring words. You're an inspiring human. You're doing inspiring things for beautiful older dogs. Everything you're doing is just heartwarming. It's been a pleasure and an honor to help hear your story. But also to get the word out about your doing it, aim locally, and you're making a big dent for those animals right in your local area. But it's something that we all can participate in regardless of where we're at.

I think that some of the neatest things you've done is people around the world are rethinking adoption of animals over 7 because of you and because of Mutville. I am forever grateful for your shifting mindsets when it comes to aging and how we view aging.

SF: Thank you so much. I thank you for having me. It's been really fun talking to you. I've heard a lot about you. Now I got to actually meet you.

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