

What I learned from a young college student
by Marilou Chanrasmi

It was a Saturday morning, spring of 2007, when I pulled into the Richfield Petco parking lot. I was part of a flurry of email exchanges the week prior as the Pet Haven dog division leadership team went back and forth about whether or not we should consider adopting one of our big black dogs, Rocky, to a young college student named Jess. Rocky was one of our “shelter transfers”. We took him from People for Pets, a shelter in rural Spencer, Iowa, just across the Minnesota border. Rural areas struggle to adopt their animals out with minimal access to adoptive families. Unwanted dogs and puppies are dumped in ditches, garbage dumpsters, and shot at. The harsh realities of overpopulation are magnified in rural areas.

Rocky was one of the lucky ones. Because we did not have an open foster home for him, Rocky was transported to one of our doggie daycare partners, Downtown Dogs, after the usual standard vetting. The applicant for Rocky, Jess, works at Downtown Dogs part-time, and goes to school full-time at the University of Minnesota studying animal science. Within days, Jess, a petite 5 ft tall soft-spoken young woman, fell in love with Rocky, a solid 70+ lb big black lab mix. She asked for permission to bring him home for a “sleepover.” A couple days later, her application came in, along with a request to bring him to our next adoption event and adopt him. On paper, Jess had many strikes against her as an applicant for a big, unruly dog – young college student with a part-time job, rents an apartment with a couple of roommates, and no fenced yard. Our screening questionnaire raised some flags on whether Jess could provide Rocky with a good home. Our questionnaire was designed based on the plethora of reasons people surrender companion animals, once considered “family.” The leadership team was divided on whether or not we should adopt Rocky to Jess: “Rocky won’t be happy in a small apartment”; “how can she afford to pay for his veterinary expenses with working part-time?”; “Rocky won’t get any exercise and will start acting out and then he will just be returned.”

Saturday morning rolls around. I see Jess sitting quietly on the outer perimeter of the foster circle towards the back of the store. Sitting quietly by her side is Rocky with a

brand new emerald green collar and a gentle leader. She's gently stroking the back of his head. I approach her and ask her how she and Rocky are. "We're great. He's the greatest dog and I love him so much. I promise to take really good care of him." Her voice quivers. Her eyes are watery. She pulls out her checkbook and tells me she's ready to pay his adoption fee any time.

I walk away. On paper we should decline her application. I look back to see Jess and Rocky's eyes locked on each other. My gut is screaming at me "Make an exception!"

I walk back over to Jess who continues to stroke Rocky's head and back, periodically leaning over to kiss him on his face. She's nervous as she sees me approaching. She's waiting for the axe to fall. I lean over, and position myself to be at eye level with her. Softly I say, "Jess, we have decided to approve your application." She leaps out of her chair, grabs Rocky, squeezes him with a big bear hug. "you're going home Rocky! You're going home!", her voice quivering with excitement. Tears roll down her cheek as she grabs her checkbook, leash in hand and scurries over to the adoption table to make the adoption official. I think she's afraid we'll change our mind.

I learned an important lesson that morning. Truth is not in black letters on white paper. It's not in words on our adoption application. That morning, I found truth by looking into the eyes of a young college student, by slowing down enough to listen, and in being witness to an incredible bond between a young woman and her dog. Truth speaks out, in the spaces between words on paper, and in what is often, not spoken or written.

Update (3/08):

Rocky, now named Dodger, is a graduate of obedience, agility, and therapy dog classes. He is also a prize winning dock jumper. Seven months later, Jess, decided to join the Pet Haven volunteer family and is now fostering for us, and continues to work part-time at Downtown Dogs while going to school full-time at the University of Minnesota.

