

PUPPY-DOG TALES

EVERY CANINE IN OUR COUNTY HAS A STORY. HERE, FOR SEVEN OF THEM, PROUD OWNERS TELL ALL. *By Gianna Barone*

From poodles to pugs, from bichons to beagles, Bergen County is bustling with puppy love. According to a survey by St. Hubert's Animal Welfare Center, 110,267 households here claim one or more dogs. Much as we'd love to gather this entire pup-ulation to sit for interviews ("Sit!"), we had to settle for chats with the "parents" of just seven of them. They shared how they met their furry friends and how these dogs are making a difference in their lives and the lives of others. Our panel of pooches includes two therapy dogs, two mascots and one small-screen star.





Nola, 8, Ramsey

If pit bull-Labrador Nola looks a little familiar, you may recognize her as the lovable stray Black from Animal Planet's reality series *Pit Bulls & Parolees*. Owners Amy Kearns and husband Zach Tweddell traveled to Louisiana to rescue the raven-haired pup from outside a Black & Decker store with help from the famous New Orleans Villalobos Rescue Center team, and the show's cameras caught their "gotcha" day in a 2017 episode of the series. Kearns and Tweddell decided to rename her Nola to honor her Southern roots, and she now completes the couple's first home together in Ramsey. When Nola isn't cuddling on the couch with houseguests or curling up to her pregnant owner's growing belly, she acts as a therapy dog at local schools and libraries—a role that Kearns says draws upon Nola's gentle and loving manner.

"Unfortunately, pit bulls do not have the best reputation," says Kearns. "She is doing her small part every day to show the world that they really are loving and incredible dogs."

Loki, 10 months, Paramus

Paramus natives Rebecca Ruber and Michael Sebahie believe their canine companion was well worth the wait. The Rottweiler-Labrador mix is a "miracle pup" for the young couple. "It was so hard to find the right fit," says Ruber. One day, Sebahie was talking with one of his clients who happened to serve as a foster parent with Mutt Mafia, a Tennessee-based rescue organization that saves strays from the South and brings them to northern New Jersey to "re-home." Ruber and Sebahie saw a photo of Loki and decided on the spot to adopt him. "He has such a calm temperament," says Ruber. "When I'm not feeling like my normal self, I know that I can rely on Loki to cuddle with me. He has so much love to give to this world that it would be selfish not to allow him to share it with others." For that reason, Ruber and Sebahie enrolled Loki at Act K9 in Emerson, where he is well on his way to becoming certified as a therapy dog to visit local hospitals.





Crusader, 10 months, Wyckoff

It's clear that golden retriever pup Crusader is much more than your average canine. He's the second service dog from The Seeing Eye in Morristown that Gina O'Rourke and her son Christian have fostered to train before finding a "forever" owner with visual impairments. Crusader, who is sponsored by Bergen Catholic High School and named after the school's valiant mascot, can be found frequenting school events, cheering in the student section at football games and making appearances all over the county; O'Rourke says foster families of guide dogs are encouraged to socialize them as much as possible. Crusader also visits other high schools in Bergen County during final exam weeks, where he enjoys getting attention from anxious test-takers.

"I feel a connection to a greater purpose," says Christian, explaining why he enjoys fostering dogs for The Seeing Eye. "Knowing that I played a part in helping someone increase his or her independence is extremely rewarding."

Frankie, 13, Bergenfield

For 72-year-old Bergenfield resident Robert McDonnell, dachshund-cairn terrier mix Frankie is a true best friend. "He really knows how to make me feel guilty if I have to leave him alone for a short time," jokes McDonnell, who in 2007 adopted Frankie together with his late brother Buttons, a blind Staffordshire terrier. According to McDonnell, Frankie wears a small bell on his collar as a nod to his days as a "guide dog" for Buttons, who used to know where to walk by following the sound of Frankie's collar. "Frankie is the absolute best companion," says McDonnell. "I'm never lonely." When Frankie and his human aren't spending time together at home, Frankie loves taking a car ride to Cooper's Pond in Bergenfield and winning lots of attention from fellow park-goers.



{ INSTA DOGS }



Maverick, 1, Waldwick

Military wife Taylore De Mase adopted Maverick, a pomsky with piercing blue eyes, from Ramapo-Bergen Animal Refuge in Oakland to keep her company while her Marine husband Michael was stationed in North Carolina. According to De Mase, the rambunctious “Mav” is the perfect pup for the couple, as he’s always up for a family trip, a hike at Ramapo Valley Reservation in Mahwah or a dinner date around town with his newlywed parents.

De Mase confesses that raising Mav on her own for a while was challenging as well as fulfilling. “Adopting a puppy is like having a baby in the sense that he needed constant supervision 24/7,” she says. “On the other hand, the best thing about it was that he always needed me.” Mav even made an appearance in his best tux at the couple’s August nuptials as the official “dog of honor”!

Pixie and Pudge, 5 and 1, Ridgewood

Dynamic duo Pixie and Pudge, two golden retrievers who reside in Ridgewood with their mom, M Mosca, are always up for some fun. Mosca, who has served on the Ho-Ho-Kus Police Department for 17 years, says she can always expect a lovefest from her two goldies when she picks them up from babysitting after a 12-hour patrol. “When I return, it’s like they haven’t seen me in months,” Mosca reports. “And I have the same reaction in turn!” Pixie and Pudge are the official Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association mascots for Mosca’s department and can often be found at local events such as Christmas tree lightings, movie nights and classroom visits around Ho-Ho-Kus. Mosca says she’d love to make Pixie and Pudge therapy dogs, but “they’re just so excited to meet new people that they can’t contain themselves.”

