

# Golden Beginnings

Rescuing, rehabilitating, and renewing hope  
for golden retrievers

*Written by Kirsten Cornell | Photography by Juliana Evans*

Angie Pierce and her family  
take pride in volunteering  
with and fostering rescues  
for Golden Beginnings  
Golden Retriever Rescue



Shari Anderson had always loved dogs, and she found herself wanting a golden retriever puppy. Happily, she answered an ad in the newspaper claiming to have several of the family-friendly breed available. When she arrived at the destination, she was horrified to find several golden and Labrador retrievers being kept in desolate conditions in an unventilated tin barn. "I purchased my puppy and left as quickly as I could, but could not stop thinking about the dogs left behind," Anderson recalls.

Looking for help to save these poor animals, Anderson discovered that there was no organization dedicated to retrievers in Houston or the surrounding areas. Securing the assistance of the Golden Retriever Club of Houston and rescue groups out of Austin, she was able to see all of the puppy mill residents saved. Due to poor care and neglect, many of the dogs, including Anderson's puppy Comet, experienced severe health issues. What looked like the end of the story for these pups was ultimately the inspiration for Golden Beginnings Golden Retriever Rescue (GBGRR).

### Fostering Love

This non-profit, all-volunteer organization rescues an average of 150 to 250 golden retrievers a year from a variety of situations including animal shelters, strays, owner surrenders, veterinarians, boarding facilities, and puppy mill closures. "It can be as simple as picking up a golden at one of the local shelters, or it can take several days to plan transport from an outlying area," explains Cil Henson, the current president of GBGRR. Whichever way rescues come into their care, the group's top priority is to connect with a veterinarian, run tests, and plan care.

Some dogs enter the program with behavior issues or health complications such as emaciation, mange, heartworms, or injuries. "Some of our dogs from puppy mill situations are so traumatized and withdrawn, that it can take years for them to acclimate to life outside of a cage and to learn to bond with and trust a human," says Henson sadly.

This is when GBGRR's foster homes become vitally important. Each rescue is placed with a foster family that works with them to correct behavior, acquire a clean bill of health, and help them build up a foundation of love and trust. Foster homes observe the dogs on a daily basis evaluating their character, temperament, energy level, and reactions to different situations. This input is taken into consideration when placing rescues in forever homes. "In many cases, the results of this personal attention are remarkable," explains Henson. "It is very rewarding to see the change in these dogs and to watch them blossom with the love and care showered on them by our foster homes."

### A Christmas Rescue

Dickens' story began on a cold Christmas Eve last year. GBGRR volunteers found him wandering the streets alone and rushed him to a local vet, where he was diagnosed with severe heart failure, respiratory distress, and a fluid-filled abdomen. His heart was infested so badly with heartworms, the doctor considered a risky surgical procedure in an attempt to save his life. "We thought we were going to lose him that night," says Mike Patterson, current board member and leader of the adoption team. "We were astounded that he was still with us on Christmas morning."

The decision was made to put Dickens on four different medications to manage the heart failure, but another problem arose: he refused to eat. "He turned up his nose at cream cheese, peanut butter, soft dog food, and even Black Forest ham. The process took us close to two hours every day," recalls Patterson. They experienced a breakthrough when a foster parent developed a meatloaf especially for him.

This Christmas will hold entirely different memories for Dickens. Now full of energy and heartworm-free, he was adopted by his foster family. "He is a sweet soul who readily welcomes new fosters into his home," laughs Patterson. "And he never turns down a meal." Patterson is keenly aware that Dickens' life would have been lost if GBGRR had not been there to give him a second chance.



GBGRR volunteer Carol with rescue Holden



GBGRR rescues an average of 150 to 250 golden retrievers each year



Cil Henson, the current president for GBGRR, with foster Shae and her rescue Bob

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- Cil Henson, GBGRR president



GBGRR, an all-volunteer non-profit organization, believes that people can make miracles happen

### Miracle of Mercy

When GBGRR received the call from a Houston shelter telling them they had a stray with an eye injury, they were completely caught off-guard by what they discovered. She was emaciated, infested with heartworms, had broken teeth, an infected eye socket with only the optic nerve left, and had scratched herself raw from skin infections. “We thought we would have to carry her, but despite her horrible physical condition, she walked to the car and pulled herself into the backseat without a whimper,” Patterson says. “We marveled at this stoic little dog’s strength and spirit.”

Immediate surgery was required to prevent the infection from traveling to her brain. Thankfully the surgery was successful, and with frequent baths and good nutrition, Mercy healed from her infections and heartworms. In five short months of foster care, she was ready for her new home.

When Amarillo resident Dixie saw Mercy on the GBGRR website, she knew they were meant for each other. “I needed Mercy as much as she needed me,”



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says Dixie. "It didn't matter that she was 'special needs,' there was something in her gaze that reached out to me." A volunteer made the 1,200-mile round trip to unite Mercy with her new family. When Dixie tearfully hugged Mercy as though they were long-lost friends, the journey proved well-worth their efforts.

### Priceless Joy

With their affectionate personalities and unique spirit, golden retrievers are very people-oriented and make great companions for families. Those interested in adopting or fostering through GBGRR are encouraged to fill out an application online to begin the process.

While rescue work is difficult, the rewards are priceless. "We experience such joy when dogs who were unloved in their prior lives meet their new families where you know they will be cherished," says Patterson. "Sometimes people can make miracles happen." **KM**



*KIRSTEN CORNELL is the lead associate editor at Katy Magazine and a softie for animal rescues. She has filled out an application to volunteer at Golden Beginnings Golden Retriever Rescue.*



## Supporting the Goldens

Golden Beginnings Golden Retriever Rescue has a myriad of volunteer opportunities available in a variety of fields:

Adoption Team  
Foster Care  
Fundraising  
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