

Retriever rescuer hooked on breed

La. man has saved 1,000 goldens so far

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By Diane Blankenburg

Those of us who have special furry "kids" know what it means to receive the gift of unconditional love. For some, this gift has been the inspiration to turn that love around and pass it on to other animals in need. And those of us who are blessed with a retriever know the extra inspiration that their daily, ready-to-please, happy faces provide. Jim Butts of Bourg wakes up every day at 3:30 a.m. with his golden retriever, Rusty, right there to remind him why he has dedicated himself to saving other golden retrievers -- more than 1,000 so far.

Butts is president and co-founder of the Gulf South Golden Retriever Rescue (GSGRR), which was officially christened in November 2003 when the group placed its very first golden into an adoptive home.

Rusty, a certified pet therapy dog, is Butts' constant companion on the thousands of miles he drives every year in delivering and picking up dogs. Butts said "he is my everything and I cannot imagine life without him."

All 1,000 rescues and subsequent placements "have one little guy to thank and that is my Rusty, because without him I would have never gotten involved in rescue."

GSGRR was formed by Butts, his wife Carol, and a half dozen fellow rescuers who worked together in another rescue group before it was disbanded. Each of them pledged a monthly fee so they would know exactly what was affordable in rescuing and treating golden retrievers. All but two of the original founders are still active today.

From that humble beginning, the group has grown into a full-fledged rescue operation with national recognition that now serves all of Louisiana, most of Mississippi, parts of Alabama and the Florida panhandle. The nonprofit, volunteer-run organization is dedicated to rescuing unwanted or abandoned pure-bred or mixed golden retrievers in the Gulf South, providing vet care, temperament evaluation, rehabilitation, foster care and placement in permanent homes.

Since the organization's beginning, the group has placed nearly 400 dogs throughout the country, with 70 percent going to northeastern states where progressive spay/neuter programs have created an abundance of adoptive homes. With the help of remote GSGRR volunteers and a transportation grant, a very successful partnership has flourished.

Commitment to their dogs is lifelong, so if irresolvable problems occur in the adoptive home, GSGRR will happily take the dog back until it can find a more suitable placement. But because of the group's thorough adoption procedures, this rarely happens.

The group was awarded the 2005 Starfish Award by the Golden Retriever Club of America, National Rescue Committee. This award is presented annually to one or more rescue groups or individuals that make a difference by their devotion to rescue efforts.

GSGRR was selected based on its efforts after the 2005 hurricanes in the Gulf Coast region. Members rescued 12 golden retrievers after Hurricane Katrina, providing long-term fostering until their families could return and ultimately reuniting 10 of the 12.

Every placement is a success and each has its own special story, but two in particular provided special joy for south Louisiana.

Young Buzz went to live with his new Baton Rouge family in March 2004 and

became the perfect canine sibling for two brothers, Matt and Ben Tully. The past three years have proven that this was indeed the

Dianne Tully, proud mother of the three boys, said "Each day we are thankful that Buzz has been brought into our lives. We just couldn't have picked a more loving and gentle dog for the boys to grow up with."

Tiger, a 6-year-old male, was surrendered by his human family due to aging and illnesses. They reluctantly gave him up when they could no longer care for him and felt it was unfair to keep him kenneled any longer. He went to his new home in November at an assisted living facility, Sunrise Senior Living Center in Hammond.

On his first day, he was greeted by open-armed staff and residents before even making it through the front door -- with pets and hugs quickly flowing into tears of joy.

It's stories like this that keep Butts going.

Butts said he got involved in this rescue work because of a "love of the breed" -- the love that started with Rusty and now has him hooked. He said "it is rewarding to hear back from people and what their adoptive golden means to their lives.

"Breed rescue is about love of the breed," which is ultimately driven by that very special dog-human bond.

Beyond his role as president and founder, Butts and his wife have opened up their home to foster 11 dogs sharing space with their own seven goldens.

Foster programs are critical to rescue groups, and Butts' and six other foster homes have done an incredible job. But they are always looking for new temporary foster homes so that the dogs can get the personalized attention that helps ensure their placements are the very best they can be. If you would like to volunteer with GSGRR, contact Butts at (985) 226-4600 or jsttub@bellsouth.net. And help pay Rusty's love forward!