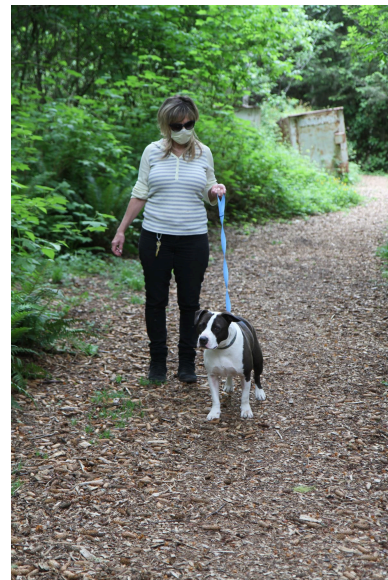


Interstate adoption: Oregonian travels 260 miles to Crescent City to find perfect canine companion to fill the void in age of social distancing

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Lynnette Hayes had been looking for a canine companion since her last pit bull mix Cutter recently died of cancer. But, after the coronavirus shelter-in-place mandate, it became more difficult to find the right fit.

“I wanted to find another companion, mostly to help me get through my medical issues,” Hayes said. “I live alone, enjoyed having a dog and want another one. Then COVID-19 came and it became harder to find one. Because, it seemed like more people were getting one because they’re home alone, too.”

Hayes was indeed a part of a national trend seeing lonely citizens seeking to fill the void left by travel and social-distancing restrictions.

Humane Society of the United States President and CEO Kitty Block told NBC News that the organization has worked with its 400 shelter partners to spread the word about the need to clear shelters by placing pets with foster and adoptive homes.

“The call has been answered,” Block said.

Hayes began her search through her local Humane Society, then expanded it to nearby counties and eventually outside her region. Then, her research of canine adoption databases discovered a possible match through PetFinder.com – 4 ½ hours south of her home in Albany, Ore., or 263 miles as the crow flies in Crescent City.

Among Del Norte County Animal Shelter's population was Stewie, with way too many similarities to her last pet to be a coincidence to Hayes. She made immediate plans to travel south, safely with mask and hand sanitizer, to hopefully adopt her next companion.

Justin Riggs, Del Norte County Animal Control Director, said adoptions have been up locally.

"We have had an increase in adoptions, although not on the scale many of the more urban shelters featured on the television news have," Riggs said. "We currently have about 17 dogs in the shelter with about 10 in foster. This marks the first time we've spent more than a day below our operating capacity of 24 in over 4 years."

Stewie was one of the newest strays to make his way to the shelter. And just last month, he found himself in the care of first-time foster "parents" Jean Rupert and her wife Janet Kasbohm.

Rupert said this was the first time the couple has ever fostered. They have participated in a clinic in Aruba (an island just off the coast of Venezuela) through United Dogs, where they spay and neuter street dogs.

"We've transported dogs and cats from Aruba to the U.S. four times. So we've been really involved. We were supposed to be in Aruba for a spay and neuter event in April that got cancelled because COVID-19 closed the island," Rupert said.

Rupert said she and Kasbohm had always talked about being a canine foster parent and were finally talked into it by the shelter's senior volunteer Shelly Pena.

"Since we're home, retired, and we can't do our spay and neuter event, we thought we'd foster since we're at home during stay at home order anyway," Rupert said.

Pena matched them up with Stewie who immediately hit it off with their other two dogs, a seven-year-old Australian cattle dog and 13-year-old golden retriever. Then, just a month later, Hayes called to inquire about Stewie.

"We were thrilled to find out someone so far out of town was interested in adopting Stewie. I was falling in love with him. Two other people, one from Eureka and a family from Portland, Ore., were interested. But then stay at home happened and they didn't come down. I never heard from any of them," Rupert said.

"So this really showed she was serious if she was going to drive all the way down from Albany. We were thrilled," she said. "When I talked to her on the phone and she said she was looking for a comfort dog, he's so sweet, so lovable, I told her he's perfect for that."

Hayes was also interviewed by shelter staff and had to log online to answer about three pages of in-depth questions.

“The volunteer staff was so happy that someone was going to adopt one of their dogs. They were all very excited,” Hayes said.

“Going through the foster parent may have added an extra step to the process,” Hayes added. “But it was actually a good situation because if the dog’s been in foster care, then they’ve had one-on-one interaction, training and learned house manners. Better to know he came from a house, rather than a kennel, because the people can tell you he’s been potty trained, he’s a good dog, doesn’t jump on furniture, chew anything up.”

The introduction was a little muted when Hayes and Stewie finally met at the shelter.

“He was really nervous because we met up at the kennel. He seemed to be attached to Gene. But other than the nervousness, he was exactly what she was looking for,” she said. “He was adorable. He reminded me of my old doggie — he had a little heart on the back of his butt and it was like somebody dipped the top of his tail in white paint. I was happy to see he was a little smaller. Because I’ve had shoulder surgery and didn’t want a dog that was going to be overpowering for me. He’s very cute. Seems very docile, not aggressive at all.”

“The other thing I love is what Jean said about Stewie – he loves to lay next to you and put his head in your lap, that’s his favorite thing to do, rather than be out in the yard running around. She said he’d make a great companion dog, which is what I’m looking for,” Hayes added.

After the emotional departure, Rupert said she and Kasbohm enjoyed fostering. Would they do it again?

“We’ll take a little break for now. But we’re willing to do foster again. It was a real good experience,” Rupert said.

Del Norte County Animal Control is seeking more foster homes for their dogs. If interested, call 707-464-7235.