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ARIZONA LIVING

For threesome, love is blind

Handicapped dog fills home with happiness

By Scott Craven

The Arizona Republic
Nov. 20, 2002

It is daybreak, and Dolci, alerted by the faint click of a lock and the creak of a door, bolts into the front yard to experience her world.

The Australian shepherd is little more than a blur of white and gray as she races to the fence, stopping just in time to poke her snout between the slats to catch the scent of morning on the breeze.

She senses a familiar odor and puts her nose up because she knows what's coming next - the rub under her chin. A few minutes later another familiar scent, and this time a pat on the head. Passers-by can't help but stop for a moment and say hello to the block's happiest pooch.

It continues this way until Dolci is ushered back inside, her tail still whipping back and forth in a friendly fury.

The 9-month-old pup doesn't realize she's been shorted by Mother Nature, who did not see fit to bless Dolci with eyes that see or ears that hear. All the Aussie knows is that she has a safe place, one with a food dish, a comfortable place to sleep and two sets of scents that come with reassuring touches.

She can also follow a series of commands, including sit and shake hands, communicated by a series of touches. It's remarkable for a dog whose euthanasia would have been considered humane by most.

But Caitlin Gannon and Teresa Terry of Tucson don't consider Dolci the lucky one. Dolci's owners consider themselves far more fortunate to be able to adopt a dog that has opened their eyes to a different world.

"She takes in everything from taste to sounds to touch," Terry says. "The world is very much alive to her. She's changed both of us, allowing us to experience things from her point of view we otherwise would have missed."

Gannon came across the dog's photo while looking for a pet online. She was struck immediately. Right breed, right look, right size. If she could have assembled her own dog from a catalog of parts, it would have looked just like this. She also noticed the words "blind" and "deaf," but by

Traits of the successful owner of a special-needs dog

- Dedication, time and patience. Raising a special-needs dog takes more attention and can include frustration as well as joy.
- Creativity and openness to new ways of doing things. For example, most traditional dog-training techniques have to be modified or reinvented.
- Appreciation of what she can do, challenging her rather than focusing on what she cannot do.
- Consistency. Try not to modify your dog's routine.
- Previous success with training dogs. If your other dogs are well-behaved, chances are better you'll be successful with a special one.
- Having another dog. The new one will learn from the first one.

Source: Caitlin Gannon and Teresa Terry, owners of Dolci, a deaf and blind Australian shepherd.

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that time, it didn't matter.

"She fit everything we'd been looking for," Gannon says. "I just didn't think being blind and deaf should get in the way. It was a challenge, sure, but we've never been ones to shy away from a challenge."

The two learned Dolci was a "lethal white," so-called by Aussie breeders because the genetic defect often occurs when certain pairs are bred. Lethal whites normally are "culled" (euthanized) within minutes of their birth.

Perhaps Dolci's previous owner had planned to do just that but lost his nerve when he looked into those milky blue eyes. Instead she was found wandering in Lakeside, picked up by the White Mountain Humane Society and eventually rescued by the Arizona Animal Welfare League, a no-kill shelter in Phoenix.

Gannon and Terry put in their request. Many questions were asked to make sure they could offer the kind of care and support Dolci would need.

Cheryl Weiner, associate director of the AAWL, says there are few people willing to take on a dog with special needs, particularly one that can neither see nor hear.

"It takes the patience of a saint," she says. "You have to work with an animal that only responds to touch. Most people would not put in that kind of commitment, but Dolci responded so well to them (Gannon and Terry). The placement was perfect."

The two drove to Phoenix to see if Dolci was right for them. They knew the answer from 140 miles away.

"The best two-hour drive we ever had," says Terry, "was coming back to Tucson, Dolci curled up in Caitlin's arms."

If it was love at first sight for Gannon and Terry, it was love at first sniff for the Aussie. The three bonded quickly, Terry recalls, and the dog was christened Dolcezza, Italian for sweetness.

The pup wasted no time exploring her new surroundings as soon as she arrived at the pair's downtown Tucson home.

Within 15 minutes, Dolci, walking quickly with her nose to the ground, knew the lay of the land. One bump was all it took to remember the couch, or stairs, or a fence.

Terry and Gannon had to learn as well. Care is taken with the placement of furniture. Should a chair be out of place, Dolci will painfully find it. Her food and water dishes are placed just so, and she is fed each morning promptly at 6:30, synchronizing an inner clock since she does not know day from night.

"She gets around extremely well," Terry says. "When we let her out, she can whip around the house in seconds."

The fearless nature of the 35-pound dog is most evident during trips to the dog park. Dolci roams freely, quickly scenting the nearest pack and joining in. Those who see Dolci for the first time wonder if the dog was born only to break their hearts. It would be easy to take pity on her, worrying about the same quality-of-life issue that leads to euthanizing similar dogs.

Such were the thoughts among the crowd at the Animal Welfare League's recent Mutt Show. Dolci, her head down, slowly climbed to the stage, waiting patiently at the end of her leash as Terry talked about the Aussie's physical limitations.

But something remarkable happened during the "trickiest dog" contest. Dolci sat with a quick tap on her rear. She shook hands with a touch to her shoulder. She jumped with a nudge under her chin.

She was, in fact, just another dog. Just like at home, when she digs up the drip system. Or steals a few cookies from the counter. Or curls up in a patch of sun for a quick nap. Dolci may not be able to hear praise or see a smile, but she senses so much more than that, Terry and Gannon say.

"It's an adventure," Terry says. "Dolci is the most marvelous creature, who approaches life with a kind of wonder that is hard to imagine. Whatever she's lacked in hearing or sight, she's more than made up for in love."

Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8773.

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