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Disabled dogs are special to some

PENNY STARR, Features editor

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Karen Anderson admits she's always been a "cat person."

That is until her son, Andy, left home after high school, leaving a void not so easily filled by her sometimes-alooof feline friends.

Her decision to adopt Allix not only started Anderson's passion for canines, but also was the first step in what she sees as an incredible journey.

Allix, an Australian shepherd/golden retriever mix, was the perfect companion, but her life was cut short when she was shot at 9 months.

Anderson says she was afraid of weathering another loss, so she did something rash.

"I did something I'd never done before," she says. "I bought a pedigree dog."

The new dog was a red merle Australian shepherd that she dubbed Jason -- a dog so attractive that Anderson claims someone took him right out of her front yard.

The canine saga continues from Jason's strange reappearance in a suspected drug house raided by police, to her adoption of three more dogs -- Amber, a Lab/ husky mix, J.C., another red merle she got to replace Jason and St. Jude, a mongrel that survived a gunshot wound and being hit by a car after Anderson discovered him cowering in her back yard.

"They just find me," she says of her ever-enlarging "family."

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Special to The Packet
Gabriel is a "lethal white" -- a puppy born both blind and probably deaf because of a genetic defect caused by the interbreeding of certain types of Australian shepherds. Karen Anderson of Beaufort is adopting Gabriel to spare him the fate of many lethal whites -- death soon after birth.

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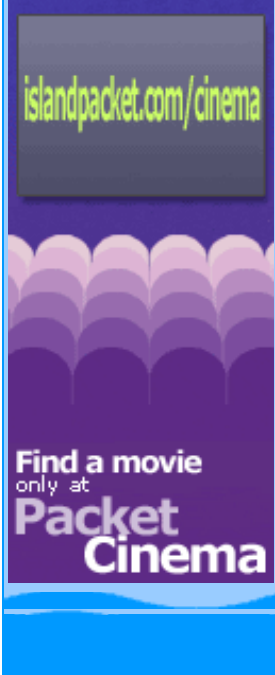
Penny Starr

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A turning point came, though, after Jason's return and the unplanned mating of Jason and J.C. Four puppies were born of the union -- two red merles, a red tri-colored and one that was almost completely white.

Anderson didn't know it, but "white" was what puppies like hers are called -- "lethal white" to be exact.

The term refers to a condition found in dogs born with two "merle genes," a phenomenon that happens when purebred merles are bred. They're called "white" because most of the pups are dominantly that color, and "lethal" because many breeders cull the puppies from a litter, killing them shortly after birth.

When Anderson's veterinarian confirmed that her puppy was blind, but had some hearing, Anderson not only decided to keep her, but also to find out more about the fate of other puppies born with the condition.

She named the puppy Allicks and began a quest that has taken her from libraries to Web sites where she has uncovered a vast amount of information about lethal whites -- and a huge network of people around the country who are trying to intervene on their behalf.

For many of these activists, the most important thing is getting the word out that merle-to-merle breeding should be eliminated.

"We do not claim to be experts in genetics, truth is we can barely comprehend the process ourselves," it says on the Web site www.aussielads.com. "Our goal is to reach the general public, as well as 'backyard breeders' by simply saying that merle-to-merle breeding will produce pups with genetic defects ... it's that simple!"

Many other dog lovers around the country are dedicated to rescuing and finding homes for the lethal whites that are born.

And whether unintentional or deliberate, there are lethal whites born every day, including one in Wyoming last month. Instead of ending the pup's life, though, the breeder somehow got Anderson's e-mail address and sent her a note asking her if she wanted to adopt it.

"I was floored," Anderson says.

The minute she saw the picture of the solid white pup with a pink nose and mouth, she also was sold on the idea of adopting him.

But how to get a puppy from Wyoming to Beaufort, where Anderson lives? Nora Zeller in Ohio came to Anderson's rescue by trying to arrange a transport plan where volunteers would drive the puppy across the country in 100-mile legs through nine states, including Wyoming and South Carolina.

"It's amazing," Anderson says of the flurry of e-mail that passed between people trying to make the arrangements. "I don't know how they do it."

In the end, that network of people was worried about a puppy taking such a long trip and found someone who seems willing to pay to have the dog flown from Wyoming to South Carolina.

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But whether he comes here by car or plane, Gabriel's journey will not be over. He will have to adjust to his new home and learn to live with his disabilities.

For Anderson, the journey still is unfolding, too. She wants Gabriel to follow in Allicks' paw prints, by having trainer Joan Gormley at PETsMART teach him basic obedience skills.

Gabriel will be more of a challenge, both Anderson and Gormley admit, but that's OK.

"(Disabled dogs) need us, that's true, but they're magical, too," Anderson says.

She's not sure when Gabriel will arrive, but she's not worried -- or bored.

Last weekend she helped transport a Dalmatian from Summerville to Sumter on a trip that took him to his new home in Virginia. She also signed up to be foster mom for a litter of kittens.


And perhaps down the road, she might be able to help other lethal whites find what their fans call "a forever home."

"I'd really like to do that," Anderson says.

Contact Penny Starr at 706-8122 or pstarr@islandpacket.com.

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