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Giving special care

By Kimberly Matas
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Dolcezza, an Australian shepherd, is a typical happy dog when she's frolicking in her front yard - running and darting, turning in circles, nose raised skyward with what looks like a smile on her fuzzy face.

It takes onlookers a minute to realize there's something different about Dolcezza, called Dolci for short. She darts to and fro, ignores commands from her human companions, Caitlin Gannon and Teresa Terry, and she can't seem to find her toys scattered in the yard.

No, she's not hyperactive. Nor does she have a short attention span. Dolci was born blind and deaf. The genetic defect is the result of bad breeding.

The term for Dolci's condition is "lethal white," not because it is fatal, but because breeders immediately cull the whites from a litter of Aussies because of their predisposition to blindness, deafness and deformities, said Cyndi Cunico, founder of the Mesa-based Aussielads Lethal White Aussie Rescue, which rescued Dolci. The genetic error occurs from breeding Aussies with merle coloring to other merles. The merle coloration is a blue-grey often flecked with black.

Aussielads has about 22 lethal whites in foster homes now and more are on a waiting list for placement in foster care. Cunico said most Aussie breeders who deliberately pair up merles trying to get more merles for their desirable coat color immediately kill any whites that are born, but it's the uneducated backyard breeders that are responsible for many of the lethal whites in Aussielads care.

"If they're white, chances are there's something wrong with them," Cunico said.

Still, she said, people should not be afraid to adopt a hearing- or vision-impaired Aussie.

"So many people think they're retarded. When I change the furniture I guide him through where I changed it," Cunico said of one of her own dogs. "It's amazing how quickly they map everything out. These are Aussies and they're the smartest dogs."

Photos, videos online

Go to www.rocketsalad.net/dolcezza to see photos and video of Dolci and Amadeo and find links to "Lethal White" Web sites.

"When you get the blind and deaf ones, it's . . . just a little extra care," she said.

Gannon and Terry agreed.

When she was 7 weeks old, Dolci was wandering near Pinetop about 200 miles northeast of Tucson. A family found her and took her to a shelter, which contacted Aussielads.

Gannon and Terry were scanning the Petfinder.com Web site looking for a canine companion when they saw the photo of the puppy. They were hooked.

Dolci, now 2 1/2, quickly learned her way around the home and fenced yard, making a mental map as she explored. When the women want to get their dog's attention inside, they stomp on the wooden floors. The vibrations alert Dolci to their location.

"We let her navigate her way around," Terry said. "She knows everything."

Dolci was a very anxious and sometimes neurotic puppy, the women said, and they often had to hold and comfort her until she calmed down.

When Dolci started feeling secure, Gannon and Terry began teaching her commands using touch signals and treats.

With just a few repetitions Dolci was able to learn tricks. "Her world is very restricted, so she was eager for new information," Gannon said. "We still talk to her. She can't hear our words, but she can feel the movement of our chest, our breath."

Terry added: "She doesn't mind whether she can't see or can't hear. She's a happy dog. She's just so smart. She's the smartest dog I ever met."

A year ago, the women decided their clever dog needed a pal. They contacted Aussielads and brought home Amadeo, then 9 weeks old, and deaf.

Though he can see, he doesn't always obey hand signals. "He'll come, but only if he sees you, and if he doesn't want to see you, he won't look," Terry said.

Now Dolci and Amadeo play together and take walks with their human companions.

Dolci is fearless, Terry said.

"We go to the dog park and (she will) run into a pack of dogs," she said. "There's nothing like seeing a dog with nothing but sensation and scent running and playing in an open expanse.

"I know there are people who would put her down, but she's magical."

● *Send suggestions for pet stories to reporter Kimberly Matas at kmatas@azstarnet.com or call 807-8431.*

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