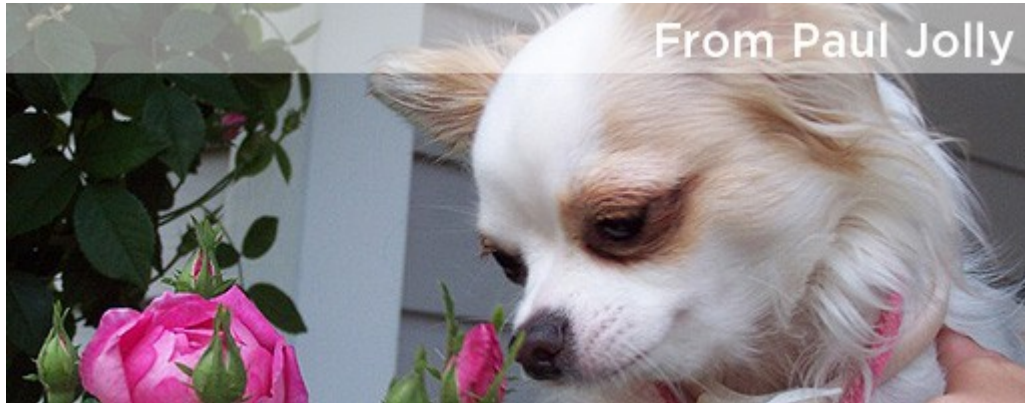


From Paul Jolly-the Petco Foundation



I have worked at Petco for almost 35 years now and at the Petco Foundation for 12 of those years. Two questions that I am continually asked are, "How do you deal with the sadness when you can't help?" and "How can you work at the Petco Foundation and not bring all the animals you come across home?"

I learned very early in my Petco career that the answer to the first question is not so easy. But I also came to believe that as someone once said, "It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can only do a little."

Thirty years ago, I had just moved into a new house in Seal Beach. I was excited about getting to know the new neighborhood and I liked to think the new neighborhood liked me. I became known very quickly as the Petco guy and was therefore not surprised when the local candy store called to let me know that they had found a dog, barely alive, in their dumpster. Would I be able to come get it?

What I found was a dirty, dingy, black and tan dog of indeterminate age with burrs and cuts and dried blood throughout its fur. His nails were so long, they had curled and bent and grown into his pads, which were infected and raw. His eyes were matted shut. And he was thin. Concentration camp thin.

I wanted to cry, and vomit and scream. I wanted to strangle those who had done this. What kind of a monster could do this to another living thing? The dogs I usually saw at Petco were loved and pampered. In front of me I was seeing the grim reality of the world as it really was and it broke my heart.

This dog was barely breathing. Gasping for air. His teeth chattering.

When I got him home, I laid him on his side and held some water to his face, and he smelled for it, his snout knocking the small bowl from my hands. As he knocked the bowl, his teeth began to chatter even more violently.

"Aren't you thirsty buddy?" I asked in a sing-song voice, my teeth chattering too. "Aren't you thirsty?"

With every ounce of strength he seemed to possess, he willed his matted eyes open and looked up at me. He was blind.

And then this dog licked my hand, he rested his head on my lap and seemed to stare directly into my eyes. He could see nothing, it seemed, but straight into my heart. I named the dog Wonder, for many reasons. Most obviously, it was a wonder he had survived for God knows how long. And he was blind, like the singer, Stevie Wonder.

Never name a pet you don't intend to keep. That's the first rule. It bonds you to it emotionally, and in a way that seems forever. But I couldn't help it. His name was Wonder. It fit.

I rushed Wonder to the vet after I found him. Wonder was 40 percent underweight and had fleas and an infected paw, and a nasty cough. But everything, I was told, might be curable. The vet wanted to see Wonder for a complete physical on Monday: blood work, X-rays, a battery of tests to see just how deep his health issues were.

"This dog is a survivor," I told the vet. "He will be saved."

Now as a lot of you know, I am not one of those dirty, stinking, the sun will come out tomorrow optimists. I knew there were a hundred reasons why I shouldn't get my hopes up about this dog. The reasons were obvious. Too obvious. It just wasn't logical. The dog might not live through the weekend. However, I spent the weekend ignoring those reasons.

I gave Wonder a bath. He stood patiently under the dryer, his eyes shut, sighing as his matted black fur turned to black gold.

By Saturday Wonder was eating well, drinking water, and wagging his tail when he heard my voice. By Sunday, I had taught Wonder to navigate the stairs, to make his way around the house, and to come to the sound of my voice. He would come right to me, walking directly into my knees actually, leaning his body into mine and sighing and wagging and smiling. Yes, he would live.

When I woke Monday morning, I had made up my mind. I would keep Wonder. That is the thing I like about optimists. They realize that life and love is all about risk and doing the illogical sometimes. Too often our childhood wonder is knocked from us at too early an age. We are ordered to act like a grown-up and do the logical thing. Even when your heart is telling you otherwise.

Wonder was a dog that had lived a nightmare of a life and still never whined or howled or cried out in pain or discomfort. You don't make a sound, I learned from Wonder, when no one ever comes to see how you are doing.

I called a group I had heard about called Actors and Others for Animals. They had a help line I was told and could help with your animal questions. They gave me lots of wonderful advice for living with a blind dog. An old dog. A dog that needed me.

So I decided. I would do everything in my power to give Wonder a few wonderful years. I would install a tether line so he could go to the bathroom outside and install gates by the stairs so he would be safe. I would clear paths in the house so he could navigate. He would become part of my family.

Later that morning I dropped Wonder off at the vet on my way to work. I dreamed of what might be. Wonder following me around the yard; Wonder snuggling with me in bed; Wonder feeling the sand in his paws when I walked him on the beach.

And then the vet called a few hours later and gave me his report after viewing the dog's lab work. Wonder's kidneys were failing, his organs collapsing, his prognosis beyond bleak. He had a few weeks, a couple of months, tops.

I still considered taking him home for those final weeks, until I was told he was in pain. He may have been silent, but he was screaming inside. So I made a decision I never planned to do. I opted to put Wonder to sleep. I took responsibility for someone else's irresponsibility. But in making this decision I also knew I had given Wonder a few days of peace, of home, of love. He would not die alone, abandoned.

When I arrived at the vet's office, I walked Wonder around outside for a final few minutes of talking, comforting, hugging, kissing, petting and crying. He smelled the grass and the flowers that had recently been planted for the Spring. I reluctantly went back in, still crying, and into a private room with a vet tech who asked if I was ready. I said I would never be ready but we had to do it...

"Do you know that this is Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Month?" the vet tech asked.

"I feel bad enough already. Geesh!" I told her.

"No, no, it's just so sad that it comes to this. Over one hundred thousand dogs are abused every year in the United States. You didn't make Wonder this way."

Staring at this dying dog, it certainly felt that way, however. And then the vet tech brought out the needle and eased it into Wonder's arm.

At first Wonder fought the anesthesia, bobbing his head back and forth, "chasing the tennis balls," the vet tech said. And then he closed his eyes. He fell asleep. He stopped breathing. It was so quick.

But much too slow.

I kissed Wonder on the snout, crying, convulsing really and I told him to go find my late brother and our dog Hope, and that he would swing with him in a hammock and they could run through heaven together.

But before I left Wonder forever, I leaned down and whispered into his ear, "It's spring buddy. You've been reborn now. You're finally free. You can finally see again."

But really it was me who could.

Working at the Petco Foundation can without a doubt be very difficult at times. Each year brings new challenges: more animals needing help, more abuse and neglect to be dealt with, and as of late, more challenging economic times, which very much affect the lives of pets and people who love and need them. Not to mention that the less people are able to financially support animal welfare organizations like the Petco Foundation, the more likely the 8,000 organizations with which the Petco Foundation partners, need our help.

But we accept these challenges every day, face to face, as humans with hearts that know no bounds. Hearts that are selfless. We do not come to work every day for the number on a paycheck, but simply because we believe so strongly in fighting the battle to make the world a better place for our companion animals. We comfort groups that are confused and scared that they can't go on, we celebrate with these same groups when their heroic efforts result in loving, forever homes for orphaned animals, and we cry for those times when it is just beyond anyone's ability to help and to save lives. Those are the worst. Some times we do have to say no.

To answer the second question we get asked, yes, we do bring animals home with us. But, we all have our limits. For me that is five dogs, a very spoiled Blue and Gold Macaw, and 50 or so cockatiels. Ask any Foundation staff person though, and they will tell you their beautiful stories of rescuing all of their beloved animal family members also.

We deal with sadness the same way everyone else does. Sometimes we cry, sometimes we get angry, and as in the case of Wonder, it ultimately makes us work harder to save more lives and create better futures for our partners and the animals they assist.

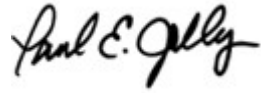
And we understand that many people couldn't do our job. There are many jobs that I couldn't do either. The good news is that we love what we do, even when it is tough. We take the good days and the bad days as they come, and know that we hold in our hands the future of the beautiful animals that we serve.

A sincere thank you to the Petco Foundation staff - Susan, Beth, Mary Ann, Sharon, Diane, Anna and Kim - for making the tough decisions, for going the extra mile to save a life, and for giving selflessly of their talents for something much bigger than themselves. They will ably carry the Petco Foundation into the future when I am gone.

This will be my last Tree of Hope fundraiser as the Executive Director of the Petco Foundation. I am confident it will be the best ever and I will look back on the results with wonder as I traverse my new path.

The human heart seems to stretch at holiday time, making room for the needy, finding an extra dollar or just a little more love to give. Fundraisers like Tree of Hope force us to look at our own lives with a grateful heart and to turn our hearts outward for those animals who are alone in the world. Those that are sad and invisible. Like Wonder.

Thank you for your support. Now and in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Paul E. Gilly". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "P".

Executive Director, Petco Foundation