

Published August 3, 2006

After \$9,000 in surgery, Rosco the beagle bounces back

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A skinny wet tongue wipes across a visitor's hand upon entering Eric and Alison Palmer's smartly decorated Lake Oswego home.

Rosco gazes unmenacingly into the newcomer's face, giving the meekest of looks.

At 12 weeks, Rosco was given away from an abusive family after a member of the previous family had kicked and thrown the puppy around the house.

"The husband had no tolerance for what puppies do," said present owner Alison Palmer.

Now, "If you ever raise your voice, he cowers with his head down," she said. "I've never seen a dog react so much."

A certified purebred beagle whose snout and torso more resemble a dachshund, Rosco's tube-like torso cautiously maneuvers down several carpet-covered stairs. His long, white-tipped tail flops around like a crocodile's as he eyes a squeaky sheep toy.

"He is such a mild mannered dog," said Palmer, a full-time interior design student at the Art Institute of Portland. With her husband Eric and son Ethan, she's owned the elongated dog for three and a half years.

Elongated dog for three and a half years

The mellow-colored walls compliment Rosco's soft speckled snout as he snuggles against his master's leg.



Vern Uyetake

Alison Palmer admires her dog, Rosco, resting after a pair of recent surgeries.

It is difficult to fathom just two and a half week before, this dog underwent nine days in intensive care at Northwest Veterinary Specialists with two multiple-hour surgeries, after rupturing a cervical disc in his spine. It caused searing pain for weeks and made standing or walking an almost physical impossibility.

When the spinal disc disintegrates, it becomes brittle and pressure is concentrated on the nerve-laden spinal cord.

And due to a deformity in Rosco's backbone, complications arose during the first surgery when doctors nicked an artery, causing massive hemorrhaging in the 35-pound dog.

Doctors had to close the wound and re-enter for another round of surgery and CT scans to finish the job while doing preventative work on adjoining discs.

In total, the bills ran up \$9,000.

For a full-time student and her husband, a student manager for an online university, the bill presented a mammoth financial burden.

"When the neurologist first looked at (Rosco), he wanted to do an MRI right then, but they had to have the money up-front," she said. "He wanted my account information – I broke down when I told him it wouldn't do any good because I couldn't pay (the \$1,200)."

So rather than euthanize, the Palmer family began to strategize.

Alison found a job watching a neighbor's kids.

Ethan, 11, walked neighbors' dogs four days a week.

"My dad even offered to get us a new puppy," she said. But the family decided, "We will just do what we can to raise the money."

The Palmers' decision to undergo the financial crisis had in part to do with Alison's childhood experience after losing her dog at a critical age.

"An English cocker spaniel – I was 13," she said. "My parents had divorced that year, I had to move out of my childhood home and leave my school – my dog was the only constant."

When tumors were found all over his body and began internally bleeding, the family was forced to put the dog down.

"Even before he passed, I had dreams of him dying," she said. "I was at the funeral and there was a huge ice sculpture of him – I thought his life was as important as a human's."

And when Rosco was diagnosed, Palmer was resolute.

“I never had an animal after him that mattered so much to our family until Rosco.”

In desperation, Alison found a Web site called IMOM.org that led her to Orthodog’s Silver Lining Foundation. The two offer open forums for advice and donations. They were created on the belief that it is heartbreaking to know a beloved pet must undergo surgery when the family is unable to pay for it. With their combined help, the non-profit foundations donated \$3,400.

Brenda Osbourne, a cancer research coordinator and co-founder of OSLF, provided emotional support for the Palmers, even sending a handcrafted fleece doggie pillow from the foundation’s headquarters in Oklahoma.

“Brenda was amazing,” Alison said.

“A lot of people love their dogs to death but if there is \$5,000 surgery, sometimes it’s hard to get the money,” said Osbourne.

“We’ve known people to sell their car or buy credit cards to pay for the surgeries,” she said.

Nibbling on the squeaky sheep toy on a recent Monday afternoon, Rosco itches at his scar down his neckline, where stitches had been removed earlier that morning.

His black and brown coat with white splotches can all but obscure the multiple surgeries and shavings he underwent.

Rosco’s able after three and a half weeks now to stand on his hind legs and doggedly struggles to climb several steps.

“He’s been through a lot, so maybe he’s in it for the long haul,” Alison said.