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Life's a balancing act for Lansing pooch

By Andrea Byl

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Life has been a big balancing act for Ernie.

He's about one year old and weighs nine pounds and walks on two legs - and he's a dog.

Ernie is a poodle-mix puppy on the mend after a surgery to hopefully allow him to walk on all fours instead of his front two. He's healing in foster care in need of an adoptive home.

The dog came to the attention of the Animal Placement Bureau in Lansing recently, and volunteers assumed he'd been hit by a car.

"The way he walks is the funniest thing about him," said Maggie Striz, a volunteer at the Bureau. "Long story short, (we had him) checked out and discovered he had Leggs-Perthes Disease," Striz said. Leggs-Perthes Disease (LPD) is a deterioration of the hip joint where the ball of the femur begins to crumble in the socket, causing intense pain, said Lorna Elliott, a Bureau board member. The disease occurs not only in canines, but humans as well, Elliott added.



(Photo by KEVIN W. FOWLER/For the Lansing State Journal)

Ernie, who was born with Leggs-Perthes Disease, sniffs around the backyard of his Animal Placement Bureau foster home while recovering from hip surgery in Lansing. Ernie's rear legs were too painful to walk on so he adapted and walks only on his front legs using his tail as a kind of rudder.

Ernie walks on his front legs carrying his rear legs less than an inch off the ground - likely as an adaptation to avoid the pain, she said.

Only surgery can correct the rare genetic condition - surgery the bureau knew would be expensive, Elliott said.

As they began looking for orthopedic veterinarians to do the surgery, they realized it would cost more than their budget allowed; estimates for the surgery ranged from \$2,000 to \$4,000.

"Of course, when you hear about a dog like that you say, 'Oh my goodness, we have to get this dog fixed up,'" said Brenda Osbourne, a founder of Orthodogs' Silver Lining Foundation (OSLF), an internet-based organization. The Foundation donated \$1,200 toward the surgery, and after finding a veterinarian who cut the cost by \$600, the Bureau paid the remaining \$200.

Nearly two weeks ago, Ernie went into surgery. The crumbling end of each bone was cut off so scar tissue would grow in its place, forming an artificial ball joint, Elliott said.

"He's got a long way to go," Osbourne said. "When you are used to not using your back legs, it takes some time. He just really doesn't know how to use those legs."

Striz took Ernie in as a part of the Bureau's foster parent program and will be helping him recover.

"We'll be doing a lot of physical therapy with him to build the muscles up in his hind legs," Striz said, adding that Ernie still uses his front legs to get around.

Despite the pain, Ernie is in good spirits, she said. "A lot of times when dogs are in pain, they are unhappy and tend to snap at people, but Ernie loves to be around people and other animals," Striz said.