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COOL DOG

FROM ABUSED DOG TO FIRE HOTSHOT

Some people believe the myth that cats have nine lives because they survive falls from high places.

Mac, a 12-year-old Great Pyrenees mix, also had nine lives. Not only did he survive an abusive start and being shuttled through nine homes, but he also gave three people their lives in February 2013. That's when the dog saved Diane Deraska and her two children after a fire broke out at 3 a.m. in their home in Colts Neck, N.J.

How did this senior dog who experienced a series of owners know how to rescue his forever family? Combine the natural ability of the Great Pyrenees to guard his territory and make decisions on his own, and add the kindness of many people along the way. The heroic dog simply followed his heart.

Mac's first life began with people who used physical punishment and withheld food as a twisted way of teaching him. Mac's second chance came when an animal group from upstate New York took in the then 3-year-old dog and posted a story about him online. When RuthAnn Meyers of Colts Neck read about the mistreated canine, she drove four hours to adopt Mac and give him a third opportunity.

But the dog's emotional scars of abuse ran deep, and learning how to trust a loving new owner required time. "When Meyers brought Mac home, he was insecure and shy with people," says Dick Palazzo, an animal behaviorist and trainer who worked with Mac at Purr'n Pooch Pet Resorts in Tinton Falls, N.J. "Every time Meyers put his food bowl down, he growled and snapped at her."

It took Mac six months to realize that his owner would never hurt or starve him. But four years later his comfortable life changed again. "Meyers told me she had terminal cancer and had decided to euthanize Mac because no one could give him the attention he needed," Palazzo says. "I felt heartbroken and after all the training, I didn't want to lose Mac, so I offered to take him."

Two weeks later, Palazzo adopted then 7-year-old Mac, and the dog's fourth life began. "It was sad because he waited at the door for Meyers to return," Palazzo says. "I introduced



COURTESY, DICK PALAZZO

him to new people, hoping that a foster home would help him come out of his shell, but after three years, nothing clicked."

Lives No. 5, 6, 7, and 8, spanning several foster homes, failed. "Mac trusted only one member of a family and growled at everyone else," Palazzo says. "One day when he was 10 years old, we took him walking on the Jersey Shore boardwalk and a woman fell in love with him."

Diane Deraska had known Meyers and offered to adopt Mac. "We had just lost our 14-year-old dog Bear.Orsa, and I never thought that we would have another dog," Deraska says. "But when I saw Mac, I knew he needed our love."

The family worked around Mac's separation anxiety and possessive issues. "His arthritis made it impossible for him to climb our stairs, but when I felt him tugging at my shirt during the middle of the night in February 2013, I was shocked," Deraska says. "I smelled burning plastic and realized the house was on fire, so I woke our two children and carried Mac down the stairs."

For the Deraska family, giving an old dog a ninth chance paid lifesaving dividends. — Elaine Waldorf Gewirtz