

Life Lessons Learned, From a Dog

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If you were expecting an essay about my volunteering experiences in Korea, you are in for an educational and informative treat! However, this is also a love story and now, a forewarning to you: heartstrings will be tugged at. This story began approximately 9 months ago, when I crossed the Pacific Ocean and landed 10,463kms from home. Bright-eyed in wonderment, I set forth in establishing my new life here. First order of business: find an animal shelter to volunteer at.

Prior to coming, I made a decision to lead a meaningful life here, and to make a positive impact in one way or another. Being an English teacher reaps many benefits, such as comparatively short working hours to other professions, weekends off, and ample free time to indulge in the pleasures of life. However, aside from immersing myself in the language, the food, the people, and the culture, I yearned for something more.

I have always been an advocate for animal rights, thus I was aware of the dire situation for dogs and cats here in Korea. But upon my first visit to an animal shelter, I almost broke down in tears; I was not prepared for what I saw in Korea. The conditions are appalling, every shelter filled to beyond capacity and barely scraping by enough to feed every dog and cat. Local pounds, or “kill shelters” that euthanize 20 or so innocent animals every week. Every day, I have to walk by “boshintang” (dog meat soup) restaurants, or dogs that are chained up to a 4’ long lead and this is the extent of their freedom as they will know for now, and forever. Dogs are mutilated, abused, tortured, abandoned, neglected, seen as “vicious” and “dirty” and “diseased”. So on a crisp and cool day in March, when I volunteered at Yangju Animal Shelter for the first time, I vowed then and there I would do everything in my power to give these amazing creatures a better life.

I began as just a volunteer, tagging along with other English-speaking volunteers. I soon learned the ropes and despite the language barrier (as the shelter staff are all Koreans), was able to contribute. 8 months later, I am now part of the “shelter family” and create weekly volunteer events and lead other interested foreigners. I update the shelter’s information online and have created numerous profiles for the dogs and since the start of my advocating, dogs who have never received any attention have been adopted or fostered out to loving homes. I was able to create more exposure for the shelter to the foreign community through the use of social media and simply word-of-mouth. I have also gained the prestigious role of “Adoption Coordinator” which gives me the power (yeahhh, I got the powerrrr!) to decide what family is deemed suitable for which dog. I screen the applicants and conduct home visits with the staff.

Every Saturday or Sunday, despite my state of mind, I meet whatever volunteers I’ve been able to scrounge up at Yangju Station at 10:30am. We take the bus for 30 minutes, then walk another 20 minutes to the rural farmlands where the shelter is located. As you approach the front gates, you are greeted by 50 or so very excited furballs. There is also a lovely stench of feces and urine that hits you like a pound of bricks and literally “takes your breath away”.

On come the hazmat suits and rubber boots and gloves, and then we begin the day with the joyous task of scooping poop and mopping up pee. We proceed onto cleaning everything in

sight, then feeding them and giving any medical attention if needed. The shelter is divided into an indoor area for the small dogs and cats, and 2 outdoor areas for the medium to large-sized dogs. We move onto the outdoors and operate like a well-oiled machine. Feed, clean, water, feed, clean water, and the cycle repeats itself. Then we wait for nature to take its course and it's time to scoop up the lunch they have promptly excreted.

Spending time at the shelter is not easy. I am not referring to physical fatigue, nor am I referring to being covered in what you can only hope to be mud and...apple juice? I am talking about the pain I feel when I see their beautiful faces through the rusted wire fences behind which they spend their livelihood. This is the same fence behind which they will most likely spend the rest of their lives. I can never decide what is worse: the dogs who continue to hope everyday for someone to love them, or the ones who have already lost hope, who look at you with empty eyes.

You would think that these dogs, abandoned because they got too old, or sick, or too big, or ugly...you would think they should be filled with hatred for the human race. But alas, dogs are unlike humans, they are so much better than us. They do not judge, they do not hold grudges. Despite whatever living hell they have been through, they forgive and all that they long for is someone to love and love them back. I have fallen so deeply in love with every dog at this shelter...But there is one beautiful girl with an old soul you can see through her warm brown eyes. She caught my attention from the first time; she "had me at hello".

Everybody, meet "Nova". I named her Nova because she is a star, just waiting for her chance to shine. Nova is a Jindo/Husky mix, on the large side, with a beautiful coat of soft orange fur. She's long and graceful and her beautiful face is the one I have the hardest time leaving when 4pm comes each Saturday. When I first met her, she was terrified. She would hide in the farthest corner of her kennel. But I sat, and waited, and waited some more, and slowly, we made progress; together we built trust and paved a way to a beautiful friendship.

Each visit, she let me into her world just a little bit more. She allowed me to sit closer and closer to her. Then I was able to pat her, and then the big moment came when she let me put my arms around her and she sat calmly in my embrace, but I could feel a tension in her muscles. She was still unable to let go of her inhibitions completely. She began to give me nervous kisses under the chin, but it broke my heart to see her cower immediately as if she was sure she shouldn't have done that.

Fast forward to the present, and I am greeted with a hug and licks and lots of tail-wagging. I rough play with her, and bury my face deep in her warm coat and I sing to her. She's a good audience. I tell her she is the best dog in the world (shh, don't tell my dogs), and that I will find her a home soon; please don't give up. I imagine her one day, sleeping at the foot of her human's bed, running through the fields freely, learning how to play. I imagine the day when she leaves her nightmare behind and wakes up in the embrace of a person to call her own. I wish I could tell Nova's story to everyone, I wish I could make everyone see what I see.

My students, my friends, my colleagues, my neighbours – they recognize now, how much I love animals, and they see my dogs and how friendly they are despite their "HUGE" size. I hope by setting an example through my efforts at the shelter and with my own adopted 4-legged best friends, I can make an impact, however small; because you will never know unconditional love until you have shared your life with a dog.



Me scooping poop!



Giving Harlow a belly rub ^^



The handout I made for them.

Animals From This Shelter

For Adoption



Some of the profiles I've created.



Pong-Pong ^^



Before (left) being adopted, and after (right) in his Halloween costume.

Giving "Angel" a snuggle (she was abused therefore only has 1 eye).



Kisses from "Hee-Mang-Ee".

Hereshe is: "Nova"



My own rescue dogs: Midori (left) and Charlie (right)



They've spent their entire lives in the shelter, in this very kennel.



Me with another volunteer with the small dogs.



Me with Handsome Kang (he also only has 1 eye).



With the manager and other volunteers.