

A Second Chance

Animal rescue group helps sled dogs find homes

By Rachael Kvapil

Mid-March brought an unexpected visitor to the home of sled dog trainer Lynn Orbison. Kramer—a sleek black and brown husky puppy—bounces excitedly from within his chain-linked kennel. He arrived from Galena, born to a large litter, all of who found other homes nearby their birthplace.

Alas, Kramer was intended for a different fate.

Lynn received the call early on the Wednesday morning Kramer was headed for the Second Chance League—an animal rescue organization that focuses on saving huskies.

Lynn, the organization's founder, rushed to the airport to pick up the young pup, take him to the Fairbanks North Star Borough (FNSB) animal shelter for paperwork, then to her home 23 miles out, where he will stay until adopted.

Kramer is the eighth Second Chance League husky placed in Lynn's charge. The other seven arrived late last year and earlier this year, many with pending applications for adoption.

The Second Chance League is Lynn's creation. The organization is based on a network of fellow dog mushers willing to provide foster homes to huskies taken to the Fairbanks animal shelter. Yet the Second Chance League is more than just an orphanage, and Lynn is more than just another crusader attempting to save a particular breed.

Huskies are unique in that their physical characteristics are as versatile as their personalities. Many are big, hairy, mellow creatures, while others are small, thin and hyper.



Lynn Orbison, founder of the Second Chance League, with Kramer, a husky pup. Lynn will care for Kramer during the next several months, while documenting his traits, which will make him easier to adopt. Photos by Art Spencer.

Lynn says these vast differences create a challenge when trying to match a dog with an owner, because most dogs arrive without a lot of background information. Instead of adopting them out and hoping for the best, Lynn has developed a system that identifies, records and further trains each dog based on its individual strengths.

"Most of the huskies are big question marks," says Lynn. "They get dropped in the drop box. We don't know who brought them in, who they're related to, or what they've done in their careers. We don't know what medical issues they've had, or what treatment they had.

"Sometimes we can tell. For instance, if they're thin as bones or fat as pigs, those are clues. But the bottom line is that it's really hard to adopt a dog that you know little about, especially if it's a sled dog."

To find answers, shelter huskies are lent to Lynn, who fosters them to one of the many Second Chance League volunteers.

For several months the vol-

unteers observe the dogs, taking notes on their physique, abilities, and temperament. These reports are filed away with the animal shelter for use when a potential owner expresses interest in available huskies.

"The shelter was just a black hole, a dead end for sled dogs," says Lynn. "We just wanted to make a difference, so we got together and formed the league. I picked the name because I believe every animal deserves a second chance."

Lynn credits inspiration for the Second Chance League in part to FNSB animal control manager and veterinarian Jeanne Olson.

Jeanne took Lynn to an American Humane Association National Conference two years ago, where she got her first real glimpse at animal rescue efforts nationwide.

Additional motivation came from her friend and shelter volunteer, Carol Kleckner. According to Lynn, Carol often expressed frustration with the difficulty that came with finding huskies homes.

"The greatest thing about this



Lynn cares for eight foster dogs, and enjoys seeing them adopted by willing owners.

whole program is that every dog I've pulled into the Second Chance League has had multiple inquiries," says Lynn. "These are dogs that were just dropped here and nobody wanted, and now that I put SCL in front of them and log them on the Web, I'm getting phone calls and e-mails, and people fight over the dogs. And I'm like, 'Wow, why is that?'"

Lynn is receiving praise and support among the dog mushing community. Among her backers is two-time Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race champion John Schandelmeier of Paxon. John contributes more than just a verbal endorsement to the effort by evaluating dogs, some of which have ended up on racing teams. Lynn says volunteers are given the

first opportunity to adopt a dog in their care.

"For me, I've come to realize once again that I am not normal," Lynn says with a laugh. "It is statistically proven within the humane industry that most foster volunteers fall in love with the animal and adopt it themselves. I, on the other hand, think it's really fun to take a dog, love it, train it, socialize it then turn around and give it to a willing owner."

In the end, Lynn hopes to find permanent homes for the 16 huskies now in the organization's six foster homes. Though there have been many inquiries, she says long-term adoption takes time. She believes all the characteristics and personalities must fit the owner's specific needs.

"The biggest mistake is adopting a husky and expecting it to be mild mannered in the same way as a Labrador or golden retriever," she says. "Huskies are working dogs, and are bored without a specific job. If they aren't given a job they'll make up their own, which is why some people describe them as hyper and destructive. There is a dog for every person. The trick is matching the human interest with the right personality." ■

For more information about adopting a dog or becoming a foster owner, contact Lynn Orbison at (907) 488-9685, or e-mail her at lorbison@ptialaska.net. Information about dogs available for adoption also can be found at www.petfinder.com.