

Survivor of Wisconsin puppy mill finds a family to love

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Wisconsin Humane Society

The day the miniature schnauzer arrived at the Wisconsin Humane Society from the puppy mill, her fur was dirty and matted, and she didn't even have a name.

Puppy Mill Survivors

Here are some statistics from the Wisconsin Humane Society's rescue operation from the Puppy Haven puppy mill:

- 1,630 dogs were rescued. Of those, 1,060 were adult dogs.
- 3% of the dogs were euthanized because of serious medical or behavioral issues.
- About 99% of the adult dogs needed dental treatment due to poor nutrition.
- More than 350 volunteers spent time with the dogs from Puppy Haven.
- More than 20 professional groomers from the community donated their time.

When the shivering 11-pound ball of fur was taken from the truck, she didn't have a name.

She might have had a number at some point, but no name. It wouldn't have made a difference. She wouldn't have known to lift her head if someone called her.

But she has a name today. It's Violet. In fact, it's "Queen Violet Josephine Antoinette Ruvin." And now she has a life filled with something she never dreamed of.

Love.

Violet, a 4-year-old miniature schnauzer, is a survivor of the Puppy Haven puppy mill in Markesan, about 90 miles northwest of Milwaukee. Violet was one of 1,630 dogs rescued when the Wisconsin Humane Society bought the mill, once among the largest dog breeding facilities in the United States, and shut it down last summer.

The closure was an unprecedented action by a local humane society, and it made international news. Now people around Violet say her story is a lesson about the power of kindness.

First things first: A name

When Wisconsin Humane Society workers found her, Violet was caged in a dark, corrugated-steel building. Her 3-by-4-foot enclosure had only a wet concrete floor. She had no bedding to lie on. Her fur was matted with feces.

Society officials suspect that she had known just one reason for human touch: to be held down while bred.

"She likely had at least four litters," said humane society spokeswoman Angela Speed. When any of the humane society's rescue personnel tried to pet Violet, the only move she made was to hold her tail tight against her body.

Violet arrived at the humane society on Oct. 8 in a truck with 40 other dogs. Whatever life she'd had before had wounded her so badly she was among the worst cases to come from Puppy Haven.

" said Natalie Zielinski, humane "What we would call her was 'shut down,' society behavior program manager. "She had no experience with the real world. She could have been hurt or physically abused, and the dogs learned in the puppy mill that when people approached them to flatten themselves. They're so afraid they melt to the ground."

At the humane society, the little dog went through the same protocol as other Puppy Haven rescues. First, she got a name.

"That's so the dog became an actual living creature in our facility, no longer a piece of livestock," Zielinski said. "When we speak to the dog by name, we give it treats. It's a nice, calming, relaxing word they associate with the treat."

Why "Violet"? Said Speed: "She looked so shy, like a shrinking violet."

The name was the first in a series of new experiences for Violet. Her fur was too tangled to allow her to walk, so Portable Pet Groomers of Milwaukee volunteered to come to the humane society to bathe her and gave her a schnauzer-esque cut. Veterinarians performed a medical checkup, which she passed, though she will have to have teeth pulled at some point because of her poor diet at the puppy mill.

Then humane society experts evaluated her to learn more about her behavior. It turns out that shrinking though she was, Violet had a great personality.

"We brought her into the evaluation room and let her sniff around," Zielinski said. "We watched how long it took her to become interested in her new environment, and it only took her three minutes" - a good sign.

To find out if she was aggressive over food, they used a plastic hand on a stick to push Violet's head away from a bowl of food to see if she'd bite. "She was fine," Zielinski said.

Paralyzed by fear

But whatever suffering Violet experienced at Puppy Haven went deep. The day after her arrival, Speed and a reporter took her outside for the first time in her life. The dog that had never walked on grass froze and curled down into a ball. After a few minutes she could be coaxed into taking only two steps, and then she froze again, her back legs wobbling like noodles.

"She's not disabled," Speed said. "She's just terrified."

The next day humane society volunteers started working with Violet. More than 350 volunteers helped the Puppy Haven dogs socialize, and several read aloud to Violet, books from Dr. Seuss to Buddhist theology - anything to bring soft, human voices into her world.

The next day humane society veterinarian Jane Pohlman spayed Violet. When she came out of the surgery, she'd regressed. She wouldn't get off her blanket or accept a treat. Humane society workers began to worry about her.

"We called her our sad girl," Speed said.

A new leash on life

However, Violet's luck was about to change. On Oct. 17, Ali Ruvin stopped in at the Wisconsin Humane Society to give a donation in memory of a friend's dog. Ruvin saw a picture of Violet posted among the Puppy Haven survivors.

"She looked like she needed the most amount of help," Ruvin recalled. She filled out an adoption application and walked over to meet Violet.

Violet shook when Ruvin and her children - Maddie, 9, Jack, 8, Joey, 5, and Gabrielle, 2 - entered her cage. "I had warned her that the Puppy Haven dogs were shy. So everyone was quiet and Ali held her hand out to Violet," said humane society adoption counselor Sarah Wolfram.

But the magic connection had already been made.

"I didn't even touch her before I decided to take her," Ruvin said. "I sat down in her kennel, and she crawled out of her little bed. Her legs wouldn't allow her to stand up she was so scared. I fell in love with her. Then she started to lick our hands. She was such a soulful creature."

It was a once-in-a-lifetime match for the Ruvins and for Violet. "We talk in our house how you're supposed to treat animals," Ruvin said. "We wanted a dog that would teach them something."

The Ruvins heard about socializing techniques and got a "shy dog kit" from the humane society that included a heartbeat pillow that has a constant thump "so Violet thought she had other dogs with her," Wolfram said.

Then the Ruvins went home. Violet went with them.

Finally, a wagging tail

At her new home in the Milwaukee area, Violet had a crate to stay in, but unlike at Puppy Haven, the door was never locked. The Ruvin kids learned not to overwhelm the little dog and to speak in quiet voices around her. Many bits of bologna exchanged hands/paws.

After about a week, a minor miracle occurred. The tail Violet held so tightly against her body broke out in a wag. After 10 days, her legs began to support her.

These days, a visit to the Ruvin household begins with a greeting at the door by Violet. She wears a pink collar "because she's a queen, and she needs something pink," Ruvin said.

The dog runs down the hallways, checking out family doings, being picked up and hugged by the Ruvin kids. She has learned to climb stairs to inspect every room. She devotes much of her day to lap time on the Ruvin couch.

'So eager to please us'

"They told us she wasn't housebroken, but she's doing great now," Ali said. "She's so eager to please us."

Violet is still learning how to be a family dog. Never having had a toy, she doesn't know what they're for, and she watches a ball being tossed in the air with no idea of what to do with it. The Ruvins are working to help her understand the concept of fun.

And 24/7, the little dog gives back.

"She has a calming effect on everyone in the family," Ruvin said. "She's such a great experience for the kids," who have learned much about patience and gentleness from the furry waif.