

Failure Is Indeed an Option

Otis, our newest furry, four-legged foster child became a temporary resident in our home in July of this year. At over five years old, he should be enjoying his twilight years in the comfort of those with whom he had already spent much of his natural life. Instead, he comes to us as a homeless senior citizen within the Great Dane community.

Kaylee, our Great Dane of ten plus years had passed away just a couple of week earlier. And after only a few days without her, the silence in our home was deafening. We were aware that Otis had been surrendered to The York animal shelter in February. We had been assisting that shelter to try and connect with one of the national level dog rescues who specialize in placing Great Danes and other large breed dogs with families willing to provide permanent new homes. Unfortunately, there always seems to be fewer homes than there are dogs available for adoption.

We were also aware that Otis would be a special case since he lacked basic social and obedience skills. His previous owner had been confined to a wheelchair for many years and lacked the capability to train Otis effectively. Otis brought a lot of joy into this mans world until he no longer had the physical capability to provide even basic care for this 150-pound bundle of energy. Even so, an older dog with this type of baggage would require a new family with large breed experience, the patience of Job, physical strength, no young children or other pets, and a flexible schedule if the adoption were to be successful.

Knowing that Otis was still in the shelter and beginning to shut down, Lora and I agreed to bring him into our home as a “foster dog” and begin the process of socializing him into an environment that was more structured and less isolated than the one from whence he came. The goal was to make him adoptable, so he could be successfully placed with his new “forever family.”

We were well aware that his social skills were on par with that of a puppy who hadn’t been around long enough to have learned much about interacting with humans or other animals. And because those social skills provide the bedrock on which behavior and obedience skills are built, we knew the challenge would be significant. Helping Otis learn those core skills would also require that he unlearn the bad behaviors that were his modus operandi in his previous world.

Since we couldn’t find a Priest who was willing to exorcise the “batcrap crazy” demons from our new house guest, we enlisted the help of the Omaha Humane Society in beginning the behavior modification journey and signed Otis up for six weeks of “Owley Growly” training. This afternoon we will all complete this training program. And we already know what the final test results will be.

- Lovability and affection for people, particularly women: AAA+
- Learning and obeying new commands: D minus
- Leash obedience: D minus
- Behavior around other dogs: D minus

There are many more categories with the D minus theme running throughout and the average pet owner would be mightily discouraged at the results. His current social and obedience skills are the primary issue that cause dogs like Otis to cycle in and out of shelters as new owners give up on the animal due to bad behavior and return them to the shelter.

We take a more pragmatic approach to his progress within the program since his initial test results were a resounding “F” in every category.

- Will he ever be able to conquer the demons and be “that dog” that you can take for a walk anywhere and not be concerned about inconsistent good behavior? Not likely.

- Will he ever be willing to let anyone approach and pet him on the first introduction? Not gonna happen.
- Will we ever be able to count on him obeying our commands the first or even second time? We're hopeful, but isn't that why prayer was invented?

No one likes to fail and for the most part, no one fails intentionally. But realistically, Lora and I have come to terms with the fact that we have failed as a foster family for Otis.

If you are not involved with dog rescue, "foster failure" doesn't mean that the dog is going to be returned to the shelter. Rather, it signifies that the family who is fostering the animal has come to terms with the fact that the dog is already in the home where they need to spend the rest of their life.

- Can we keep him in a safe environment and expect acceptable behavior from him when we have guests? No question.
- Do we have the resolve to take him for walks daily to keep him healthy and content? Yep, at five o'clock every morning, so that are chances of running into distractions that make him difficult to control are kept to a minimum.
- Is he happy living with us? Absolutely. He loves to hang around his new mom and dad as much as possible. He now owns the home that he entered as a guest and has no problem demanding being cuddled or held whenever the urge strikes. He can and does sleep peacefully, stretching out in pure bliss accompanied by a deep sigh to signify all is well in his world. There is nothing more gratifying than having earned the trust of an animal.
- Will he continue to get better? Sure will, at the speed of dirt, and we're okay with that.

So, this afternoon, Lora and I will officially become foster failures and Otis will become a full-fledged member of the family. And the messages from our friends in the rescue community will all begin with the words:

"We heard you failed. Congratulations!"

Bio

Dave Swett is a Vietnam-era Air Force veteran. His was a technical support role for the navigation and communication infrastructure between ground and air combat forces. Acquaintances made within the military remain among his best friends today.

Dave has been involved in the creation of technical training programs for over 35 years and has authored many training manuals for the heating and air conditioning industry. He became involved with the Warrior Writers over two years ago to help improve his writing skills and effectiveness and to build new friendships with others who enjoy writing. Free time is spent with family and friends.

Dave and his wife Lora have a passion for Great Dane dogs. They have enjoyed bringing special needs Great Danes into their home for over 20 years and hope to continue to be involved in that cause for years to come.