**Duncan Down Under**

‘An Angel disguised as a BRT’

By Lisa Rosier

It is June, 2009 and it has been 2 years since my husband, Chris and I had seen Duncan, the Black Russian Terrier (BRT) we rescued two years ago, who had been found wandering the fields of Missouri. As our flight prepared for landing at Brisbane International Airport, Australia, I am excited at the prospect of getting home and seeing my family again, and a little apprehensive when I think of Duncan and being reunited with him; would he remember us? He had touched our lives as much as he had dad’s and we missed him. As we taxied along the runway, my thoughts take me back to the remarkable journey rescuing Duncan had taken us and so many others, who have come to know him… You may already know this story which has gathered media attention both locally and internationally, so I won’t go into too much detail in this article as you can hear and read about it on the BRTRA website, but to get an understanding of what Duncan has done for my family you need to know some of the history that led to this pairing and perhaps some stories you may not have already heard.

My dad and I are avid animal lovers, especially dogs, so I grew up always surrounded by dogs of various breeds that we had rescued from local shelters in Australia. Duncan was our first introduction to the wonderful world of BRT ownership. After losing my beloved German Shepherd Dog (GSD) Isis, the sister to Mona, dad’s beloved GSD that had died years earlier and that he mourned daily, I could not consider having another GSD. Someone told me about BRTs and after researching them for almost a year, I decided on rescue. After a few months of waiting, we finally received a call about a BRT called Duncan, who had been rescued from a kill shelter the day he was to be euthanized; he was estimated to be around 12mths old. He was in bad shape, but the couple who had saved him had made great strides in his progress. I made the arrangements for his flight to Spokane. At the same time, my dad was making his way to Spokane from Australia to surprise my husband Chris for his 50th birthday. We were concerned about dad as his physical health had suffered lately, but more importantly his emotional and mental health had us worried. At 69 he had given up on life.

 The day came for us to get Duncan from Spokane International airport. We arrived as the cargo staff wheeled Duncan’s crate into the cargo facility. We approached Duncan’s crate and as I placed my hand on the crate door, Duncan greeted me with a gentle lick, we loved him immediately. I dropped Chris off at work and on the way home I took Duncan to visit a close friend, Rebecca, who was nervously waiting to hear from a vet who was operating on the leg of her rescue, a 12mth old standard poodle she called Gracie, who had suffered great cruelty with her previous owners. She had sustained a break in her rear leg which had gone untreated for months resulting in a severe infection, so the previous owners dumped Gracie in a shelter where she was discovered by Rebecca and adopted.

Rebecca enjoyed our visit and fell in love with Duncan who was remarkably calm considering what he had been through and these new changes in his life. A short time later, Rebecca received a call from her vet who himself was in tears, *‘I could not save her leg, I am so sorry, the infection had eaten away her bone marrow and the bone shattered like porcelain’*. He went on to explain that due to the extent of Gracie’s neglect, she was not out of the woods and her recovery was ‘touch and go’. As Rebecca cried, Duncan walked over to her, put his paw on her lap and gently rested his head. We both looked at each other in amazement at this extraordinary dog, a BRT who had over 300 dead ticks on him and smelled terrible from the tick dip. He was thin and had pock marks on his body like he had been shot at with a pellet gun or worse, he was badly matted and as we found out later had an infected toe from a chick weed that had worked its way into his paw, yet he wanted to console Rebecca, a stranger. She needed this reassurance from Duncan who stayed with her until her tears subsided.

 I remembered what the couple, who had rescued him from the kill shelter, told me, ‘*Duncan was an angel disguised as a dog’*, I was now a believer. Duncan and Gracie went on to become great mates. Having three legs did not hold her back and they loved playing together until he left on his journey to Australia. (Gracie passed away earlier this year from bone cancer in her other rear leg. Rebecca will always be grateful for the comfort Duncan brought her and the companionship he gave Gracie).

 After I took Duncan home from our visit with Rebecca, I made arrangements for a vet checkup and a groomer. The next day I went to the airport to pick up my father after his long flight from Australia. He was frailer than I had remembered him and he walked with a steady but slow pace. As we talked in the car on the way home I told him about Duncan, and he was a little stunned, *‘Three dogs Lisa? Are you crazy?* (Fn1.) As I tell Dad Duncan’s story, his face softened, ‘*poor bugger’*, he says. We arrived home and upon entering our house; dad’s attention got diverted from Chris to Duncan. He walked past Chris and immediately bent down to hug Duncan who had made a ‘beeline’ to dad. Within minutes the two of them were on the floor playing with each other and became inseparable the entire time dad was with us.

After weeks of seeing the two of them together, gathering strength in each other’s company, Chris and I realized that we were meant to rescue Duncan for dad, especially given the timing of Duncan’s rescue and my dad’s visit. (We had tried many times to get dad over to visit us, but his health would become a factor, dad was able to make the effort for Chris’s birthday).

The day came when dad had to leave and return to Australia which was extremely difficult for all of us; Duncan would not leave dad’s side. As we drove away from the house, I looked over to dad as tears rolled down his face; I had never seen him like this. Other people who had seen the difference in dad and Duncan agreed that these two needed to be together and a community united with us to reunite Dad and Duncan in Australia. And so began the stressful and long process of vetting government red tape, health checks and fundraising. Quarantine is compulsory in Australia, the minimal stay is 4 weeks if you have the paper work and health requirements done in advance, and approved. The wait was torture for dad, and as the word spread, BRT people in Australia visited him with their BRTs to take his mind off Duncan, if only for a short time.

There were many setbacks; in particular, Duncan had developed a tick virus, a reminder of his life in Missouri. If his blood antibodies did not go down to the recommended level for admittance into Australia, he would be refused entry. This would be devastating news to dad, and I did not want to think about the impact this would have on his health. Duncan was put on several courses of antibiotics, his flights were once again changed and we had to wait another month, which was distressing to dad. So, before his next blood work, I read up on the virus to understand my enemy, desperate for his blood count to be down before his next scheduled test date.

Weeks pass and finally the day comes around for his blood to once again be tested for this tick virus. So, the night before his blood work, I convinced my husband that we should do this spiritual healing ritual on Duncan that I had read about, he reluctantly agreed. We *egg over Duncan’s body, asking that his illness be transferred into the egg and then toss the egg into a stream of running water. It was around 11pm and we loaded Duncan into the car and drove to a bridge nearby with a running stream. We got Duncan out of the car and walked him to the bridge. It was a beautiful night, with a full moon casting shadows on the trees and surrounding mountains, it was deathly quiet except for the gentle sound of water splashing on the rocks under the bridge. We performed the ritual, and tossed the egg over the bridge; we waited to hear the splash as the egg hits the water to assure ourselves that we had performed the ritual correctly, there was too much at stake for mistakes. After a few seconds we hear, ‘quuaaaccckkkk, quuaaccckk’, we had hit a duck!! It broke the tension as we laughed; the duck was ok, although not happy about being woken up by a falling egg! Did this ritual work? Or the prayers of many that we would be successful? I can’t be sure, but the tests came back negative for the tick virus and Duncan could now enter Australia. (Duncan spent a month in quarantine in Sydney and dad and Duncan’s reunion in Brisbane was captured on all the local TV stations as well as a national morning show called, Sunrise. (Fn2)*

 *As I watched the plane taxi to the terminal my reflective thoughts are disrupted by the Captain announcing our arrival at Brisbane International Airport. We made our way through customs and immigration and were greeted by my stepmother Marie; dad had wanted to stay with Duncan. We drive the 40 minutes home catching up on family and events, and as Marie pulled into their driveway dad let Duncan out the front door to greet us, a ritual he does every time one of them comes home. We opened the car doors and got out. Duncan ran to us, making excited noises, greeting us with licks and paws. He remembered us alright! For the next month, Duncan divided his time between our room and Dad’s. It was reassuring to know he loved us, but it was clear that dad and Marie were his ‘parents’, this was his home and he loved it, and why wouldn’t he? He is spoiled! He has a place at the table; he has a habit of resting his head on it so a napkin is put there for him. He gets the best food, treats, meat etc. He goes on walks, and if dad is not well enough to walk him, a neighbor’s son will take him. He gets to run in the dog parks, on occasion chase a kangaroo or cockatoo (something they are trying to discourage him from doing). Although Duncan has his own bed, he sleeps on their bed too, dad’s beloved Mona, was never allowed to do that!*

*If dad is not well, Duncan will always be at his side. There were many times when I saw dad sitting in his chair, or lying on his bed and his hand would automatically reach out to pat Duncan, knowing Duncan would always there and he was. One day I made a comment about this to dad, fighting back his emotions he said, ‘you know Lisee (an affectionate nickname for me) I don’t know what I would do without Duncan… you know I rarely think of Mona now...I just love every hair on this boy’s body’.*

*Over the next several weeks, it was wonderful to catch up with family and friends and it did not escape our attention that every conversation with dad and Marie always led back to Duncan. We were inundated with stories of Duncan ‘down under’, his personality traits, funny habits and quirks, intelligence and the special joy he brings to them and others who meet him. Let me share with you a couple of those stories…*

*On a visit to a nearby park, dad and Duncan encountered a bus load of respite patients who were on an outdoor excursion. A nurse approached dad to find out more about this, ‘good looking dog’ he had. Dad told her Duncan’s story and how Duncan has helped to heal him emotionally and physically. The nurse asked dad would he mind taking Duncan to Val, the woman sitting in the wheelchair nearby. ‘…she loves dogs and after having a stroke, she has not spoken…she misses her dog… perhaps, Duncan could help her?’ Dad of course agreed. He walked Duncan over to Val; Duncan instantly sat beside her and gently placed his paw on her lap. Val slowly put her hand on Duncan’s paw. Duncan while looking at her with his big brown eyes rested his head on her lap and nuzzled her, a smile appeared on Val’s face and as she reached out to dad’s hand, squeezing it, dad noticed tears in her eyes. She looked at dad and whispered, ‘thank you’. The nurse standing nearby is overcome with emotion as she explains to dad that this is the first time Val has* uttered a sound. This has a profound effect on dad, who fights back tears and asks if he can bring Duncan to their facility to visit Val and other patients, the nurse agrees and since then dad has made regular visits with Duncan.

Then there was the story of a man walking his timid 6 month old Great Dane puppy who came across Marie and Duncan on a walk together. The man apologized to Marie as the pup cowered and hid behind him. He has been trying to socialize his puppy, but the poor thing is terrified, he explained. Duncan approached the puppy and looked at him, wagging his tail. The pup stopped cowering and Marie suggested they walk together to see if Duncan can reassure his dog, the man agreed. As they walked, the puppy became calmer and more relaxed, eventually they parted ways. A few days later Marie and Duncan are out on another walk and came across the same man and his puppy. He thanked her profusely, the walk they shared earlier in the week had changed his pup and she no longer cowered. He could not believe the difference walking her with Duncan had made. Marie told him, *‘this is Duncan’s gift’*.

The day came for us to leave and return to the USA, it was bittersweet, although I have lived in Spokane WA for 9 years now; my heart is in Australia, where I grew up and where my family still lives. There were hugs and tears shared with family and friends and promises made to return home again soon. And so, after giving Duncan a big hug, we left for our long flight back to Spokane, WA.

These were just a few of the stories I am fortunate to be able to share of this amazing BRT and the joy he brings to all who meet him.

I miss my family and friends and of course Duncan who will always have a special place in my heart, but a smile comes to my face when I remember the stories we heard, seeing Duncan and my dad together and the happiness and comfort Duncan has brought and continues to bring to everyone he comes into contact with. But for us it is very personal. Duncan has added precious years to my father’s life, bringing hope and happiness to dad and a purpose to get out of bed each morning. Duncan has done this by being himself; it is his nature, but more than that, he has a gift, a special aura about him. Duncan is loved not just by a man, his family and a neighborhood, but by communities both local and international who came together to reunite a man and his dog. Dad once told me that sometimes, if you are lucky you will get to experience having that one special dog in your life that becomes a part of your soul, for him it was Mona until he met Duncan, now he counts his blessings and fortune to have experienced two special dogs. Duncan truly is an ‘angel disguised as a BRT’, and we are grateful and blessed that he chose us to be a part of *his* life.

Footnotes:

1. We have 2 standard poodles who are known in Spokane as ‘Goodwill Ambassadors’ for the smiles they bring to people as they ride behind my husband’s motorcycle in the custom dog chariot he built for them. We are also fortunate to be owned by a BRT called Tunka, we affectionately refer to as ‘Baby Huey on Steroids’. He too likes to ride in the chariot.

 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeWpYap1IY

1. Sunrise interview on dad and Duncan’s reunion in Australia. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6AnpfwirsY>