

# THE REDEMPTION TRAIL-

## A FOSTER CARER'S TALE

BY MELISSA RIMAC

**For a boy who'd spent less than a year in this world, Pierre had clearly seen too much.**

Pierre entered our lives an emaciated and terrified boy, shockingly tormented by harrowing memories. Any attempts to pat him were met with a rapid retraction.

Just a few weeks later, Pierre's default facial expression bloomed into a big, beaming grin and as he walked, he'd swish his tail and swing his hips joyfully. When I sat next to him, Pierre snuggled up close to me.

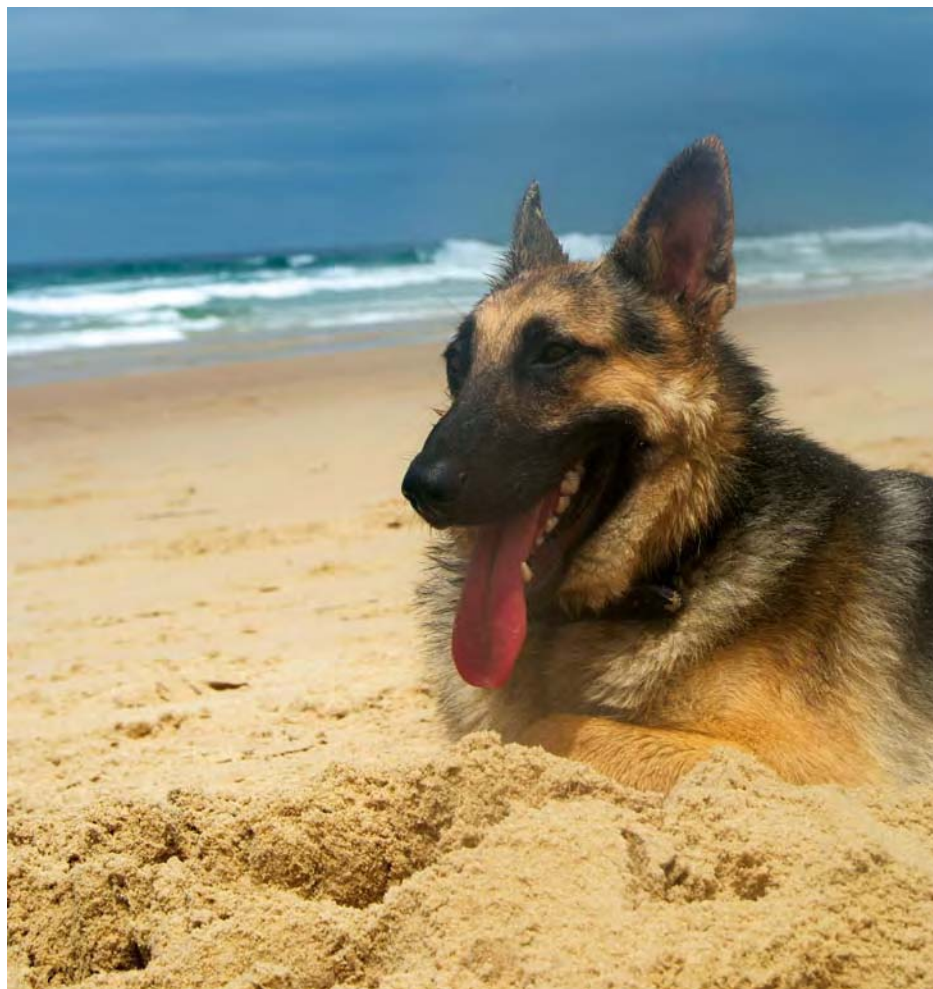
It's miraculous what a few weeks of foster care can accomplish!

I've long supported animal charities, but I was eager to find a way to directly and accountably contribute to an improvement in an animal's life.

While organising a event, I noticed a young German Shepherd on the Renbury shelter website I thought would be an excellent addition to the day. Several emails later, my long-held desire to become a foster carer for Save a Shepherd, a charity which rescues and re-homes German Shepherds, became a reality.

So traumatised was Pierre when I picked him up, he couldn't walk on a lead and had to be carried into the car. At the traffic lights, I watched the skinny, wild little wolf in the back seat, his face contorted into a mask of frozen fear, and wondered how I could start to turn his life around.

On reaching our yard, the confused, bedraggled puppy I'd carried from the car hid under the stairs, trembling if we came anywhere near him. Happily, our dog Onyx knew exactly what to do; he wagged his tail and welcomed his guest. The puppy emerged cautiously, but was soon responding to Onyx's playful overtures. Eventually, the puppy, who was to be renamed Pierre, was drinking from Onyx's water bowl and gingerly following him up the stairs.



I'm a big believer in the healing power of voice, and as we had just returned from New Caledonia and were still giggling at our attempts to drop suave-sounding French phrases, we decided we'd speak to this puppy in French, hoping the sing-song rhythm and frothy tones would ensure laughter in our voice.

Unlike most pound dogs, this puppy treated food with degustation delicacy. As we watched his personality tentatively emerge, his expressions started to relax and a fetching, debonair face took form. With his finely chiselled bones, graceful movements and self-contained serenity, the puppy brought to mind an arrestingly handsome, finicky French man. The name Pierre popped up and stuck.

Pierre tried very hard to convince us that bathing him was tantamount to torturing him, but from the bubbling bundle of angst emerged a handsome young dog with the prance of a ballerina.

When we went to our farm, Onyx herded Pierre out of the car and organised a vigorous game of chasing. Watching Pierre's stride lengthen and his bounds become increasingly powerful, I got the impression it was the first time he'd ever roamed free.

As Onyx led the way down the creek for adventures, and taught Pierre the finer strategies of tug of war and rumbles, a guru/disciple relationship developed. At Blueys Beach, Pierre's gorgeous stride assumed full flight, though he took only tentative steps into the ocean, loth to get his loafers wet.

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Although my job was to help heal Pierre, caring for him proved a balm for me as well. Trying to make Pierre laugh and to supplant his trauma with happiness brought out my silly and spontaneous side. I spoke to him in goofy faux-French, and I nattered to him constantly. I sung to him also and entertained him and Onyx with a repertoire of silly noises that soon got both sets of tails wagging. I started to feel like a one-woman canine version of The Wiggles. Stress about bills, deadlines and general discontent vanished in the haze of creating the most fun and loving an environment I could conjure.

Caring for Pierre drew upon fresh reserves of patience, perseverance, compassion and hope. Meanwhile, I started to feel stronger, calmer and more reflective. I became aware of the extent to which even minor sounds and gestures can have a profound effect, both with animals and with humans. Just a little extra TLC can, in some cases, change lives.

Watching Pierre's personality hatch from its shell has been among the most rewarding things I have ever done. In all likelihood, it's the first time that Pierre had experienced love and affection, and I'm gratified I had the opportunity to provide it.

Like Pierre, the lives of thousands of dogs have taken a radically sunnier turn when they've been taken in by a foster carer. As is the case with children, the foster family provides shelter and food, but most importantly, love, affection and guidance until a forever home is found.

While some rescue dogs may have suffered trauma and confusion and may need extra attention, others are in great shape and simply need a temporary home.



### Foster Caring information:

Most rescue organisations have a foster carers programme. Some, such as **Save A Shepherd** ([www.saveashepherd.webs.com](http://www.saveashepherd.webs.com)) are breed-specific, others, such as **Sydney Pet Rescue** are generic, while groups such as **Senior Dogs Rescue** specialise in mature, calmer dogs. The **Renbury** website ([www.renbury.com.au](http://www.renbury.com.au)) has a link to rescue groups, as does [www.petrescue.com.au](http://www.petrescue.com.au) and [www.operationtoby.com.au](http://www.operationtoby.com.au)

Alternatively, if you spot a dog at a shelter website who appeals to you, you can approach a rescue group about fostering. **Rescue Rex** ([www.rescuere.org.au](http://www.rescuere.org.au)) has links to council pounds where many dogs urgently need foster care.

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When most people think of animal welfare, large organisations typically come to mind. However, thanks to the largely unsung network of foster carers, countless dogs who would have otherwise been killed are given a second chance, and have now found wonderful new homes.

After entering the pound, a dog's survival is basically a numbers game. By taking in a foster dog, you have, quite literally, saved that animal's life.

It's a system with bonuses all round. The foster carer gets the satisfaction of knowing they've made a huge and immediate difference to an animal's life. Adopting parents get to see the dog in a normal home environment, and to learn about any specific quirks. Pierre for instance, is an angel around horses. For the dogs, foster caring can mean the difference between life and death.

Pierre slotted in so well, and he and Onyx so revelled in sharing life's adventures, that he's become a part of our family. Each week, new and endearing traits reveal themselves, and I now have a mischievous teenager on my hands. There will be challenges ahead, but I've never spent so much of my day convulsed with laughter. 🐾

