

Adopting an animal is an incredible experience to adding to our lives. We have adopted several over the years and each one is unique and different. We had decided to keep our dog numbers down as we always have a foster or two, but things changed pretty quickly and not by our choice. In all the years and the hundreds of animals that have come through our home, we have never kept one.

In February, I went with American Humane to Sparta, Tennessee to assist in a “puppy mill” seizure of 300 dogs. The day after the seizure we went in to care for all the dogs in warehouse at the local fairgrounds. We teamed up in pairs of two to clean and feed all of the dogs. Fellow teammate, Barb Davis, and went along the never ending rows taking turns holding the dogs while the other cleaned. We came across this semi bald little dog who huddled against the back of the crate shaking. I spoke softly to her and she wagged her tail a little still pushing her body against the back of the crate. I slowly reached my hand in and she put her tiny paw in my hand. It was meant to be. My husband and daughter were quite shocked when I said I was bringing a dog home. She only weighed two pounds, so it really is hard to call her a dog. I named her Sparta. Now the tough stuff begins.

I always counsel people when adopting that it does take work. Each animal is unique and has behaviors that we don't necessarily appreciate. This is a big part of why we offer free obedience classes to anyone who adopts a dog. Housebreaking is usually a big frustration to many people. It can be easy and it can be hard. In reality, it is easy, but we have to be consistent to make it happen. The worst dogs to housebreak are the puppy mill dogs or dogs that have been kept in shelters for long periods. These dogs do not have to “hold it”, they just pee and poop right where they at. Sparta was about 10 months old and had never been out of a cage. She was so small, we wanted to be lax with her, but it would not benefit her nor us in the long run.

Many people are adopting puppy mill dogs and so I want to share Sparta's housebreaking story to help others. Talk about frustrating! Having to be on the ball every second, because every accident sets the dog back. Many people use size as an excuse for not worrying about housebreaking with small dogs. We used a crate and a child's play pen. The child's play pen was more for her security because she was scared of the big dogs at first. I admit it was also for our sanity because going potty anywhere did not faze her. Some people criticized me for keeping her in a pen after she had been kept in a cage her whole life. It is not a bad thing, because it does give them security. It is scary for them just to be thrown into the world. What I will say, because I knew the type of cage (a wire cage) that she was kept in, I never put her in one. She was only in soft or plastic crates so as to not bring back those bad memories.

Unbelievably, even though it was February and she was half bald, Sparta did not mind the snow or the cold. (She was kept in an outdoor shed in a cage.) This was a blessing to help with the housebreaking. Now, how do you reward a dog for going potty outside: praise, treats, picking her up, attention, a toy? All right answers depending on the dog. We had to find Sparta's biggest motivation, the reward that meant the most. It took two months. She loved the treats and the praise, but not enough. We had tried letting her

sleep with us, but even in the bed she would have accidents. So we put her crate in the bed with us. Yes, I love my husband very much! Brandon wakes up early than I and would get the dogs out. We finally learned her favorite reward. Getting back in bed with me after peeing and pooping outside. I would wake every morning to Brandon carrying a scrumming Sparta towards the bed to get in the covers with me. She would go right out and in one spot perform both as fast as possible to get back in to go to bed with me. Progress finally! As a Certified Professional Dog Trainer, I am embarrassed to say that it took several months. She finally understood what we expected from her which made our relationship even better. But then a relapse.

Unexpectedly, we had to leave her alone with the other dogs and had a friend come over to get them out. They could not get Sparta and she had accidents that day and on and off for another month, just from that one day. We had to start rewarding her again. Now she is back to her good form, but we still have to be on the ball and praise and reward her for going outside every time. She does get to sleep with us now.

With all the different things we can teach our dogs, housebreaking is generally first and foremost to most people. Sparta was such a challenge it was hard to take time to teach her anything else. There were two other important things that I taught her in the beginning. One was to help her adjusting to her new world. She did not know how to interact with the dogs appropriately. So I taught her how to bow. A play bow in dogs is an encouragement to play and is a very positive language to give to other dogs. Bowing gave Sparta confidence with the big dogs, if she gets uncomfortable, I tell her to bow. The second was to come when called.

Sparta's world is now a wonderful place, she can hike for long periods, loves riding in the car, and she just loves being with all of us. She's come a long ways from a cage in Tennessee to the Rocky Mountains, but she couldn't be happier. Actually, she has been the happiest the past few weeks while a suffered from an ankle sprain and have been in bed or on the couch a lot. Her favorite reward!