



# A Tribute to Mutts

Like snowflakes, each one is unique—and never to be seen again

BY CARRIE ALLAN

**When I walk our dog around the neighborhood,** I often see a springer spaniel curled up on his front porch with his family. There's a Pomeranian who lives a couple of blocks over, and a set of miniature dachshunds who greet us by howling, hurtling off their front steps, and flinging themselves at the fence like low-slung ninjas.

There are several glossy golden retrievers, and in the early fall evenings, they promenade with their people, their coats shining in the last of the day's light.

Often I stop to chat with these fellow walkers. The conversation, of course, is mostly about the creatures at the end of our leashes.

"What a beautiful poodle!" I will say to a young mom and her daughter, as their dog prances proudly at their side.

"Oh—thanks!" the mom will answer and, seeking to respond in kind, will glance admiringly toward my feet to meet the eyes of our chubby little pooch, Coltrane. "Your ... dog ... is very cute, too."

This is the subtle approach. Sassier kids in the neighborhood have been known to put it more succinctly: "What is that dog?"

My response varies with my mood. Sometimes I identify our dog as a "purebred beach ball," other times as "a beagle-pig mix." And I think—I do not say it out loud, because it seems rude to rub it in—*And no matter how hard you look, no matter how much you pay for some fancy pants name-brand pooch, you will never find another dog who looks just like him.*

**That is the beauty** of those dogs once disparaged as "mongrels."

Mongrels! Ha! More like purebreds unto themselves.

Our dog is a mongrel, a mix, a mutt. He's the ultimate hybrid vehicle, a plump little scoop from the melting pot of doghood. And though his muttness means he was the result of an unplanned pregnancy—sometimes I whisper into his ear, "You were an accident!"—we could not be prouder.

Don't get me wrong: A dog is a dog is a dog, and all of them are beautiful and worthy of love. I have a soft spot for certain breeds—the hilariously hyper miniature pinschers,

## Winston: Adopted by the Carlson family

Everybody needs somebody to lean on.

But not everybody has been leaned on by a 128-pound Doberman mix. When Winston leans affectionately, the objects of his devotion sometimes topple over.

That doesn't make the pale golden dog any less popular with his adopters, a Spokane, Wash., family who'd planned to foster Winston just briefly for SpokanAnimal C.A.R.E. They've fostered and adopted many animals in the past for the group, whose executive director, Gail Mackie, is a friend of the family.

But the dog acclimated to the Carlsons' household so well they ended up keeping him. He insisted on staking his claim, Christel Carlson says; when he arrived at the home, he bypassed the three shepherds and shepherd mixes to flop onto the dog bed closest to the fireplace, the warmest seat in the house. "I guess everyone realized he had the shortest hair and needed that bed," Carlson says, "because there were never any arguments."

While Winston fits perfectly into the family, he doesn't always fit under their table, which is where he likes to hang out during meals. Taller than the rescued pony who lives on the Carlsons' farm, Winston has to crouch down when he sneaks under, occupying most of the territory usually reserved for feet.



my fellow redheaded Irish setters. And while I was growing up, my family had purebred English cocker spaniels who all came from amazing, caring breeders. They were sweet-tempered, beautiful dogs, and for a while, I couldn't imagine getting another kind.

But in my 20s I came to work at The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and discovered shelter adoption. The first time I visited a shelter, I was floored by how many different kinds of funny, adorable, strange, lovely mixes were in the cages.

My first adoptee was a fluffy, lustrous, red-and-black shepherd-beagle-chow mix with shining golden-brown eyes; she looked like no dog I'd ever seen before. When people told me I looked like her, I took it as the highest compliment.

Animal shelters that have been slow to capitalize on these rare commodities would do well to learn from more profit-driven entities—like the snooty jewelry store aiming to appeal to well-heeled consumers in a TV commercial I recently saw. "We don't sell watches," the voice-over intoned in a velvety purr. "We don't sell bracelets. We sell ... exclusivity."

Can't shelters make the same claim? With their poodlebassettrievers and their Labracolliewhatsits and their ever-evolving lineup of shepherdsomethings, shelters should be the first place discriminating consumers go to find

animals as unique as they are. Adopting from a shelter is like shopping at a boutique where every item is one of a kind.

(OK, most boutique stores don't smell like bleach and cat food, but otherwise, the comparison stands.)

**Over the years I've been baffled** by the attitude that years of breeding for certain traits make for a better, more valuable animal. Maybe it's a difference in how we measure value; to my eye, no matter how perfectly pedigreed and healthy, a purebred collie looks virtually identical to the next purebred collie. And the more closely a purebred's physical traits meet the recognized breed standard, the "better" dog he is judged to be.

I understand the nostalgia that drives someone to get a dog just like the one she had as a child—or the desire that prompts a person to choose a canine companion based on the herding, jumping, and otherwise delightfully obsessive traits he's been bred for. But if looks alone are the measure of the ultimate dog, why get a replica?

Among some diehards I've known are women who would be mortified if they showed up at a party in the same dress as another woman—and yet take pride in having a dog who looks exactly like every other dog of that breed.

*Yawn.*

### Crosby: Adopted by Sarah Babcock

Many folks get their mutts at the local animal shelter, but Sarah Babcock's first mutt came to get her.



When a Doberman mix turned up at Babcock's door as a stray in Richmond, Va., in 1996, Babcock searched for his

owner through fliers and ads in the paper.

No one showed up, and Babcock decided to keep him. Crosby was her first dog since childhood, when she'd enjoyed teaching the family pooches to behave.

When she took Crosby to training classes, Babcock learned that the old domination models for teaching dogs had evolved into more cooperative methods. And Crosby turned out to be a fast learner.

"I taught him how to get me drinks from the fridge in one morning," she says. "And I thought, 'This is so cool.' And when I thought about how many

dogs were still being jerked around by trainers and realized I could be a part of changing that, I got hooked."

She quit her job of 14 years, went back to graduate school, and is now the chief of education and training at the Richmond SPCA. She's adopted several mutts since then, three of whom were on a cover of *The Bark* magazine last year.

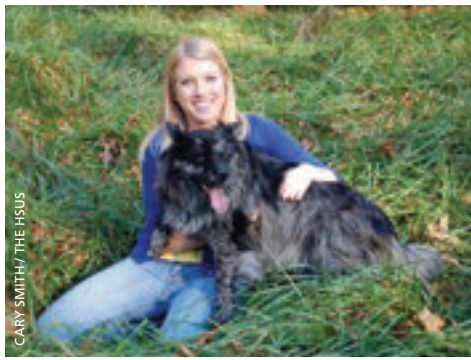
Crosby died last August. He had spent more than 10 years with Babcock, learned 50 tricks, worked as a therapy dog, and become part of the SPCA's humane education program.

He was still fetching drinks from the fridge until his last few weeks.

"There was a mutt who definitely changed a life," Babcock says. "You don't expect one dog wandering up will make you give up a corporate career and do something so different."

## Amelia: Adopted by Amy Briggs

Almost as soon as The HSUS “adopted” Amy Briggs as *Animal Sheltering* magazine’s production



CARY SMITH/THE HSUS

and marketing manager in 2008, Briggs returned the favor, adopting Amelia, a mysterious mix with smoke-colored fur and golden eyes.

Amelia had an adventurous background. An escape artist, she’d slipped away from her former home and headed straight for the local golf course, where she evaded capture for several weeks. She was finally humanely trapped by Hedgesville Hounds, a rescue group based in Rockville, Md., but her family didn’t appreciate her Houdini act and no longer wanted her.

The rescue group had more sense and took the dog in for fostering.

And soon enough, Briggs—a recent college graduate whose top postgraduation plans had included finding a job and

adopting a dog—found her on Petfinder.com.

Since then, the initially skittish Amelia has settled into her new life. Now Briggs’ cubicle mate as part of The HSUS’s Dogs in the Office program, she’s known for looking just a little like a werewolf.

Curious about the genetic background of this mystical creature, Briggs had Amelia DNA-tested last year to see exactly what blend she had brought home. “I’d never seen anything like her,” she says.

Before the test, Briggs assumed her dog’s tendency to follow behind was prompted by the herding instincts bred

into Australian shepherds. “When I found her, that’s how she was listed,” she says. “But she doesn’t have any of that in her.”

Instead, the test results revealed that Amelia was one-quarter chow, one-quarter Lab, and one-quarter whippet, with assorted odds and ends making up that last 25 percent—making her a mystery who may never be fully solved, but is now fully loved.

## Susie: Adopted by the Donovan family

Susie’s profile had been online for several weeks, but she’d had no takers yet.

The black mutt with a speckled white chest had several strikes against her. She was a big dog (many people are looking for pets who’ll meet the arbitrary weight requirements of apartment complexes), a black dog (they often don’t show well in online photos, disappearing into the shadows of their kennels), and an old dog (everyone wants an adorable puppy).

She had come to Oakland Animal Services because her previous owner had died. Day after day, she looked back at

the shelter staff and volunteers, her broad face silvered and serious. She was having a hard time at the shelter and was getting depressed. Volunteers were working to bring her out of her shell. When they took her out in the yard, they discovered that the old girl had a lot of love left to give. She would even chase a ball—“only a few times, and only a few feet, but still!” says Amy Hirschkron.

With fellow volunteers Tim Anderson and Steve LaChapelle, Hirschkron had gone above and beyond the call of duty to highlight Susie’s sweet nature on her Web profile,

taking pictures outside and adding video and music (the Isley Brothers’ “Who’s That Lady?”) in the hopes of catching someone’s eye and ear.

It worked: A family looking for an older pet to round out their crew of husband, wife, 4-year-old daughter, 7-year old dog, and 21-year-old cat saw Susie’s profile online and fell in love with her.

The feeling was mutual. Susie went home, and the last Hirschkron heard, the dog was licking the tears off the little girl’s face when she hurt herself playing.

“I really thought we were doing her the favor

by getting her out of the shelter, but it’s the other way around,” says adopter Betsy Donovan. “She’s done us the favor by bringing us so much love and laughter.”



OAKLAND SPCA



MICHELLE RILEY/THE HSUS

*Animal Sheltering* editor Carrie Allan with her mysterious “beagle-pig mix.”

Mutts are for dog lovers. Where purebreds are primarily examples of the breed, mixes are primarily dogs, their dogginess superseding all breed characteristics. Give me the short-legged retriever mix, the protuberant pug-spaniel cross, the piggy-tailed greyhound with long, dangly ears. There is no more American dog.

For years, scientists have debated the merits of “hybrid vigor”—the notion that crossbreeding different genetic lines makes for healthier individuals—and how it applies to dogs. Many experts say it’s only logical that animals from genetically diverse backgrounds will be healthier and less prone to the inherited flaws passed down through family lines.

But I’m not interested in proving that mutts have better genes; I just think they’re cooler. I want a dog I can contemplate, and I find mutts more interesting: Each one is a fingerprint, a unique work of art who’s part Pollack, part Picasso. Each one is her own little self-contained mystery, a dog to inspire reflection about the vast history of doghood that came before—the wolves, the foxes, the hounds and spaniels and terriers, a millennia-old baying, bawling pack rolled into one righteous pooch.

Coltrane’s primary breed is obviously beagle, but there’s a good bit of something else mixed in there, too. He’s stockier and plumper than a traditional beagle, his ears are shorter, and he lacks the classic black patches that mark the standard tricolors of the breed. (Sometimes I like to imagine the unholy union between beagle and sow that might have produced him.)

He is getting older, and my husband and I are beginning to have moments when we realize—as we watch him become whiter, struggle to rise from the couch, and sleep more and more of his hours away—that he will not be with us forever.

And there’s the real heartbreaker of mutts. Now and then you find that perfect beaglepiggywhatsit, the one you love so much and find so endearingly funny and delightful and cannot imagine living without—and you know you’re in the same boat with your poor deprived neighbors: You, too, will never find another dog like him. [AS](#)

### SPICY CONDI-MUTTS

Heinz 57 sauce is a condiment, reddish and spicy, but the term “Heinz 57” was originally coined to brag about the great variety of products offered by the ketchup company. Over time, the phrase has also come to refer to a single mutt made up of so many different breeds that it’s really anyone’s guess exactly what “ingredients” he contains.



### HE’S A TRAMP, BUT THEY LOVE HIM

Many still think of Lassie as the quintessential American dog, but the fictional purebred collie has some muttly friends who are just as iconic, including Disney’s Tramp, TV dog Benji—first played by a shelter adoptee named Higgins, who was already 15 years old when he signed on for the role in the first Benji flick in 1974—and the dog who broke a thousand hearts, Old Yeller.



### SIX MIXED-BREEDS OF KEVIN BACON?

When it comes to getting a pet, “doing the right thing is also doing the sexy thing,” says Julia Szabo, a writer and mutt proponent who’s quick to rattle off a long list of celebs, including Kevin Bacon and wife Kyra Sedgwick, who have adopted mutts. Szabo once dyed her own hair to match one of her mutts, and she loves mixed breeds so much she even wrote a book about them, *The Underdog*. She continues to advocate for shelter adoption whenever she can. “It’s the cool, sexy, Hollywood thing to do,” she says.



### DOGGIE DNA

These days, you can solve the mystery background of your own mutt by having his DNA tested. Most of the commercially available tests cost around \$60; more expensive ones screen for more breeds. The dog’s DNA is gathered via a cheek swab—which you can do at home, provided your pooch is amenable—or a blood test, which must be conducted by a veterinarian.

