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INSPIRE!

Melissa and Bo Hannon with Twinkle.

Love & Rescue

When two dog-lovers met their match in each other, the stars aligned, not just for them, but for all the dogs they would go on to save

By Jen Reeder

It's practically an urban legend to meet the girl or guy of your dreams in a bar, get married and live happily ever after. But Bo and Melissa Hannon, founders of Peace and Paws Dog Rescue in New Hampshire, are proof that it can happen.

Melissa was teaching elementary school in Arizona when a group of teachers pressured her to go out with them one Friday night, and she relented. Bo was studying to become a motorcycle mechanic when he and a few biker buddies decided to go to the same bar. He spotted her across the room and sent her a drink.

"It had been so long since I had actually been to a bar and been sent a drink that I didn't know what to do," Melissa said. "The teachers were like, 'Thank him personally!' So that's kind of how it started."

Bo and Melissa went for a motorcycle ride the next day and

dated for almost two years before moving together to New Hampshire, where they married in 2006. They had two dogs at the time; Sky, their Boxer mix, served as maid of honor, and Tucson, a Shepherd/American Stafford mix, was best man.

When the newly married Hannon's wanted to add to their family by adopting another dog, they were surprised that local New Hampshire shelters had some empty cages, and no puppies.

"I'd never lived anywhere where you could walk into a shelter and they weren't completely full," Melissa said. "That is unheard of in the rest of the country."

A quick look on petfinder.com, a searchable database of adoptable pets in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, turned up many homeless dogs in the South, including a skinny white Shepherd mix named Giddy at a high-kill shelter in Alabama. Something

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Melissa with a pup before adoption.

about Giddy tugged at the Hannon's heartstrings and the next thing they knew, they were working with the Alabama shelter to have Giddy, along with several other dogs, transported to New England. The experience would prove to be life changing, and not just for the dogs.

The Hannon's promptly fell in love with their newest family member. They also realized they wanted to start a dog rescue organization to transport more homeless dogs from the south and rehome them in New England. This was how, in 2007, one year into their marriage, they came to found the nonprofit Peace and Paws Dog Rescue. Their mission? "To match the world's best dogs with the world's best people." They soon had a network of volunteer foster families and had added "Rescue Riders Transport," a custom van with 37 crates to transport even more dogs. To say the couple has thrown themselves into their new vocation would be an understatement; Peace and Paws has, to date, rescued more than 2,300 dogs that would likely otherwise have been euthanized.

In each other they have definitely found a complementary match. Melissa says it's good that she and Bo founded Peace and Paws together because rescue is so "constant," noting resentment can start to build if only one half of the couple is involved in rescue because of the time commitment.

"We're lucky that we're in a situation that we're both in it," she said. "We both notice how busy the other one is and how hard the other one works."

Not long after adopting Giddy from a shelter in Alabama, the Hannon's adopted Twinkle, a Lab/Pit Bull mix, from the same shelter. While Giddy is a mellow, sweet dog, Twinkle is a bit more "cat-like," independent and almost resentful when asked to do something she doesn't particularly want to do. This difference in personality has created a huge online following for Giddy and Twinkle, with Melissa writing a "Tip of the Day" on a sign that hangs from Giddy's neck and Twinkle wearing a sign with a snarky retort (for example, mocking a hat Giddy is wearing). Over 300,000 Facebook fans follow the antics of Giddy and Twinkle (as well as guest appearances by their friend Nugget).

Their personalities in the "Tip of the Day" are very much like what their personalities are. Twinkle's very snarky and kind of obnoxious—she's a bit of a bully—and Giddy's kind of mellow and chill and cool...People liked to see the 'animosity' between

the two dogs," Melissa said, adding that they're actually pals.

Giddy and Twinkle's popularity is certainly put to good use. They spread adoption awareness and canine education through their photos, raise money for Peace and Paws with sales of their annual calendar, and even helped fundraise to build an animal sanctuary on the Hannon's property called The Ruff House Retreat Adoption Center. For the latter, the dogs competed to see who could raise more money on the crowdfunding website Indiegogo.com (Twinkle won, for the record). The effort saw supporters donate over \$100,000 and the structure was built in less than a year. It opened in spring of 2014; Riley, the first dog rescued and housed there, was pregnant with puppies born in the Ruff House's whelping room.

"I start to get emotional because we wouldn't have done it without all those people," Melissa said through tears. "I really, really genuinely know that everything that's in there and every dog that we save is because of [our supporters]. There's no way Bo and I could have done any of this on our own. To raise that kind of money would have taken us years... It allows us so much more flexibility in terms of the dogs that we can save, including special needs dogs."

The community of people who have adopted from Peace and Paws are grateful right back. Michelle Barry and her family have adopted two dogs from the rescue, Bowie and Zappa, both as puppies. Peace and Paws transported Zappa, an Australian Shepherd/German Shepherd mix, from a foster family in the south to New Hampshire for adoption. Bowie, a female Australian Shepherd/Golden Retriever mix, had a particularly rough start. Her mom was a pregnant family pet left behind when her family lost their home to foreclosure; she gave birth to her puppies in the house's crawl space, where neighbours eventually found them and called Animal Control. Through Peace and Paws, one of the pups—Bowie—found her forever home with the Barrys. Both dogs now hike with their new family and get to stay in hotels with them when they travel to dog-friendly cities and beaches. Barry says they are bonded in a "profound" way.

"They love us—we're their people," Barry said. "They just keep giving back every day."

The Barrys now volunteer as a foster family for the organization. They consider it a way for both the humans and the

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rescued dogs to show their gratitude for finding each other. "We pay it forward, and I like the concept of the dogs paying it forward. They got their chance at a great life, and now they're teaching these little puppies that come in how to behave in a house and how to get along with other dogs. Little things that only dogs can teach other dogs," Barry said. "They're getting really good at it now."

Josee Dupont, a New Hampshire resident originally from Quebec City, Canada, who has adopted two dogs from Peace and Paws, said Melissa Hannon almost has a "sixth sense" of knowing how to perfectly match a dog with a human. She couldn't be happier to have adopted Amigo, a Chihuahua, and Anouk, a Border Collie/Flat Coated Retriever mix nicknamed "Miss Crummet" from the Hannon's. She encourages others to "adopt—don't shop" no matter where they live.

"Often people have this wrong idea that dogs end up in shelters because they have issues, but that's not the case at all," Dupont said. "If we all adopt instead of buying dogs we could have no more euthanasia in just a few years—that and spay and neuter."

Tara Mahady adopted a 10-week-old Catahoula mix on July 13, 2009, and named her Olive as a nod to Peace and Paws since an olive branch symbolizes peace. She credits Olive and Peace and Paws with changing her life. Before adopting Olive, Mahady had been a "Type A" marketing and fundraising workaholic.

"I had always loved being outside but I wasn't making time for that for myself at all—I wasn't making time for anything. Olive got me outside again and reminded me that there's life outside of work and computers," Mahady said. "I lost a ton of weight, went back to yoga, became a yoga teacher, quit my job—I trace it all back to Olive coming into my life...I honestly don't know where I'd be right now if it weren't for her."

There's no doubt about it: Peace and Paws is something special.

Melissa's really humble. I don't think she or Bo have a clue about how deeply they impact people's lives, both in terms of the dogs that they adopt out but also just in the community they've created around Giddy and Twinkle and the Facebook page with all that education. It brings so much joy to people's lives," Mahady said. "She and Bo just have hearts that are so huge." ■

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