

San Francisco woman champions senior 'mutts'

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Debbie Swanson, NowU

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"I DIDN'T even know my life was incomplete before opening Muttville," reflected Sherri Franklin, founder of the San Francisco-based senior dog rescue.

With 25 years as a hairstylist and salon owner under her belt, Franklin was both financially secure and happy in her career: Client interaction and fashion were right up her alley. But as she approached her late 40s, she felt her focus changing.

"I'd been volunteering at animal shelters for 12 years, six years as the vice chair of the Animal Control and Welfare Commission of San Francisco," she said. "Many senior dogs never made it out of the shelter due to their age."

The ache of watching these lovable canines await homes — often in vain — nagged at her.

"Instead of buying nice clothes, I began buying dog-walking clothes. Instead of a manicure, or shopping, on my day off, I spent more time with the dogs," she said. "I saved money that way, which I spent on dogs — if one was about to be euthanized, I'd take him home, fix him up, bring his picture to the salon, talk to my clients about him. Eventually, we'd find him a home."

She toyed with opening a nonprofit, but admitted that delving deeper into the research would scare her off. Around her 49th birthday, a walk with a friend spurred her to action. "My friend said, basically, it's now or never. I'd talked about this enough; it was time to do something; I needed to at least try," Franklin recalled.

And try she did. After gathering a board of directors — many of whom were hair clients — Muttville Senior Dog Rescue became a reality in 2007, charged with changing people's image of dogs age 7 and older. Initially, Franklin, now 58, worked more than 60 hours week, juggling hairstyling with the rescue. Only recently has she been able to live on a salary from Muttville. Although she maintains some long-time hair clients — "It gives me reason to dress up" — her main focus is Muttville, now boasting a staff of 10.





Courtesy of Fuzzy Beastie Photography

Accolades have piled up, including awards from the American Red Cross, countless Bay Area awards — the mayor of San Francisco declared May 10, 2011, as "Muttville Senior Dog Rescue Day" — and an invitation to Oprah's "favorite things" show. To date, almost 2,500 young-at-heart pups have trotted through their doors.

Among re-homed dogs, happy owners and satisfied volunteers, happy endings are plentiful, Franklin said.

A staff favorite is Spanky, a 9-year-old mixed breed lacking use of his rear legs. Learning that the dog was slated to be put down, Franklin went to visit. "He was so full of life. I made a harness from a towel, to hold up his back end, just to see if he'd walk. Spanky didn't walk — he ran! We took off around the block, and I

knew we had to find him a home."

After outfitting the 20-pounder with wheels, his infectious personality earned him a new home. His owner, not bothered by Spanky's medical challenges, kept the Muttville staff apprised of the mutual love that's stemmed from the matchup.

"I can make my day just by reading my email," Franklin said.

Thrilled with the success of the program, Franklin remains steadfast in her goal to raise awareness of senior dogs and show them a better world.

"I haven't slowed down enough to bask in the success, but some day I will," she said.

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