



Pets

'No dog should die alone': Photographer promotes senior pet adoption



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Senior dogs Flopsy and Sebastian were rescued from neglect in a backyard in the summer of 2012. They have arthritis, but they still love to play, chase squirrels and frolic in parks.

Lori Fusaro is crazy about dogs. She's lived with them for as long as she can remember, and she **photographs them for a living**. But until about a year ago, the idea of adopting an older dog made her squirm with uneasiness.

"I thought it would just be too sad and painful," said Fusaro, 44, of Los Angeles. "I didn't think my heart could take it, so I wasn't willing to open myself up."

Fast-forward to the present: Fusaro is lavishing affection on the most recent addition to her family, a sweet-natured 17-year-old dog named Sunny. Sunny rewired Fusaro's view of older dogs so completely that she decided to launch a photography project called **"Silver Hearts"** to show how much senior pets have to offer.

"My hope is to inspire people to not overlook the old ones," Fusaro said.



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Meet Sunny, the pet who changed photographer Lori Fusaro's mind about senior dogs and led her to launch a "Silver Hearts" photography project to benefit them.

From a 'comfy couch' to a dog kennel

While doing volunteer photography work to help animals get adopted from jam-packed shelters in L.A., Fusaro grew increasingly alarmed by how many senior dogs were languishing because no one wanted them. And when she learned that many pet owners surrender their dogs near the end of the animals' lives, she was appalled.

Then Fusaro observed how painful the whole situation can be for everyone involved.

"It's often an economic thing," she said. "I've seen people just in tears and just so torn that they have to give up their animal. ... It's really been eye-opening."

Animal welfare experts see such scenarios all across the country. Confronted with a serious illness or another major life upheaval — such as a divorce, a home foreclosure or even a military deployment — an animal owner suddenly may be unable to care for a longtime pet.

Another common situation with older dogs is that their older human owners move into nursing facilities that do not accept pets.



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Potter's life began in a puppy mill and nearly ended after he was left at a shelter at age 10. A volunteer working at an adoption event saw him still sitting there at the end of the

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day, and she decided to bring him home. She told photographer Lori Fusaro that Potter is a little hard of hearing, but he loves playing with her kids and taking long walks.

Justin Scally, national director of emergency services for the [American Humane Association](#), said senior animals often represent the highest-risk population in shelters, even though they tend to be the calmest, easiest pets — and they're already house-trained.

"The most difficult part about older pets in shelters is that many have gone from a comfy couch to being stressed in a dog kennel," Scally said, noting that this happens to most senior dogs "by absolutely no fault of their own."

That's what ultimately prompted Fusaro to overcome her uneasiness and bring Sunny home last June. Then 16, the dog definitely had health issues — infected eyes, and a large cancerous tumor on her leg — but Fusaro felt almost irresistibly drawn to Sunny.



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Photographer Lori Fusaro hugs her two dogs, Gabby, left, and Sunny. "When you bring dogs out of a shelter, they start realizing that they're safe and they're being loved by a new family," Fusaro said. "They come out of their shell and want to experience life."

"I was so touched by her," Fusaro recalled. "Her owners had turned her in because she got cancer. I just couldn't believe that she had lived with a family her whole life and she was basically going to die in a shelter."

Fusaro has spent money on veterinary bills for Sunny, but she insists it's not as bad as people might think. Vet visits helped clear up Sunny's eyes and led to a \$60-a-month prescription for pain medication — but Fusaro and her vet opted to avoid costly, invasive treatment for Sunny's cancer.

When animals age: Poignant photo portraits captured

"When you adopt an older dog, that's part of the package — you're probably going to have to make decisions like that," Fusaro said. "But for extreme health issues that would arise, I would not prolong her life just to keep her living. I want her quality of life to be good. ..."

"I always come back to the idea that no dog should have to die alone. Even if she got just two months of joyous, happy life, it's worth it for my heartbreak."

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After Sioux's owner passed away, surviving relatives brought the dog to a Los Angeles shelter. The senior dog was fortunate to be adopted by a new family. She now spends her days sunbathing in the backyard and going on walks.

'Silver Hearts' project for senior dogs

Sunny's transformation from a scared, disoriented shelter dog to a happy, playful family member got Fusaro thinking: Maybe she could use her photography skills to help a whole bunch of senior dogs.

About six months ago, she began work on what she hopes will become a photography book called "Silver Hearts" with a tagline that says, "Love doesn't keep track of years." Once the book is published, Fusaro wants to donate proceeds from book sales to three dog rescue organizations that do a good job finding homes for senior dogs: [Peace of Mind Dog Rescue](#) in Grove, Calif., [Willy's Happy Endings](#) in Woodlawn, Tenn., and [Louie's Legacy Animal Rescue](#) in Ohio and New York.

So far, she's taken about 80 percent of the photos for the project on both the East and West coasts and places in between, where she's visited with families who responded to her [Facebook solicitation](#) for compelling stories about their older dogs.

Fusaro tried raising money to self-publish a high-quality photography book through an [online Kickstarter campaign](#). The campaign generated a lot of interest, but it didn't reach the fund-raising goal by a pre-determined deadline, so all pledged money remained in donors' pockets.

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Eddie was adopted by his family as an older dog. He is still full of energy and loves to run on the beach. He plays fetch and is always up for a belly rub or cuddle time on the couch.

The dogged photographer isn't giving up, though. Rather than self-publishing, she may pursue a more traditional route through established publishing companies, or she may produce a calendar featuring happy photos of gray-muzzled pooches.

"All I really care about is changing the perception of older dogs," Fusaro said. "They might be slower and they might sleep a little more, but all the old dogs I've met in this past year like to play with their toys and chew on their bones. They still have that zest, that joy for living. ...

"When I look back at my unwillingness to adopt an older dog, it was more about my own selfishness — about not wanting to feel that pain, not wanting to make hard decisions. But every dog is important. Every dog deserves a home. I finally just boiled it down to love. That's the most important thing."

To see more of Lori Fusaro's photographs of older dogs, check out this photo gallery and watch Fusaro's YouTube video below:

 [There's life \(and love\) in these old dogs yet](#)



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A Los Angeles animal photographer is on a mission: To change people's perceptions of older dogs and help more gray-muzzled pooches find loving homes. See images from her

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