

The State of *Grace*

By Wanda Pooley

This is a story that has probably been told a thousand times, maybe 10 times that number. But when something like this happens, we are compelled to record it, to share it, to help cleanse our hearts that we did the “right thing.”

But it's also a story of many lessons we need to learn over and over. Rescue workers have a great job, a hard job, an emotional job, and a damning job. When it goes bad, they have to shoulder the blame while their hearts are heavy.

For breeders, it's a lesson of diligence. Disease is quiet and stealthy. It calls for keeping everyone informed about testing.

For dog owners, it's a lesson of gaining knowledge about the animals they love; of being aware that life with them can be fleeting.

For all of us, it's a lesson of hope. Hope that we continue to learn and understand our breed. Hope that someday diseases like this will be conquered.

Here begins “The State of Grace”

Buoyed by a successful day at a field trial, I returned home to find the answering machine patiently holding messages. Pressing the button, the first message stopped me in my tracks.

“Hello, this Becky with the Winnebago County Animal Control. We have a basenji at the shelter. Please call me as soon as you can. Thank you.” Click.

I reran the message and jotted down the number Becky left.

“Hi, I would like to speak to Becky.” I asked.

“That's me” replied the woman on the other end of the line.

“I'm returning your call about the basenji at the shelter.” I answered. “What do you need?”

Becky then described a stray basenji that had been turned in by a woman who found the dog wandering near a busy highway. In my county, the policy is to quarantine any stray for seven days. If no one claims the animal in that time and it hasn't bitten anyone, then it's considered adoptable by the general public. To my dismay, they don't

contact rescue groups until the dog is literally down to its last day. Apparently some of those in the “general public” protested that they never have a chance to get any of the purebred dogs if the rescue groups get involved. Hence, the current policy.

Becky continued, “Wanda, my sister has a basenji and I know what she went through the first couple of years. I think a basenji could be quite a surprise for someone who doesn't know anything about the breed. I really want the shelter to let this dog be placed in Rescue and I found your name in our file. Can you help?”

“Well, Becky, our club is very active in rescuing basenjies and will, no doubt, be able to help, but first tell me more about this dog.” I asked.

“Ok, it's a female, brown and white, a bit thin, and seems OK so far temperament wise. She had to have a Bordatella so we poked her. Nothing. Then she had to have the Parvo shot, so she was poked. Again nothing. Had to poke her for heartworm. She didn't even try to bite.” Becky explained.

“Poked?” I quizzed. “

Yeah, you know...with the needle,” she explained.

“Oh, got you.” I said, illuminated on this new medical term.

“Anyway,” Becky went on, “If she can tolerate all that without complaining, it seems to me she might have a pretty good nature and you could find a home for her without too much trouble. You guys would be more experienced in placing a basenji. I just don't want to see this girl placed with just anyone who walks in the county shelter and plunks down enough money. If you can, would you come to the shelter and get her? I'll clear it with the staff before you get there.”

Ok, I'm not on my breed club's Rescue Committee, but like others I have been willing to lend a hand. Besides, this dog was only a few miles from here and who better to just run over and take a look. You know, make sure this is really a basenji. I agreed to stop at Animal Control the next morning.

Entering the lobby of the shelter, I approached the desk. “Hello, I'm Wanda Pooley and I represent the Basenji Club of Southeastern Wisconsin Rescue Committee. I understand you have purebred basenji here.”

The tired and knowing eyes of a technician stared at me. Obviously not impressed by my ‘I'm here to save



the Dog' invisible shield on my chest. I suspect this gal had seen this all before. She just gestured with her head at the guest register. "Sign in. Dogs are in the kennel room. Third door on the right down the hall."

Obediently, I registered. Walking down the hall, I peered in each room. Cage after cage of cats in the first room; the next door had a sign proclaiming 'Cat-Nursery.' Reaching the third door, I turned the knob and pushed on the door. The room was state-of-the-art. Properly ventilated, well drained floors, clean and secure kennels, and filled with all the leftovers, the unwanted, and the strays. Canines of all descriptions, sizes, and colors. Several kennels down the first row stood Grace. She looked out at me as if to say, "Well, it's about time!"

I looked around, then kneeled to gaze in to her eyes. Grace stood there just staring back. Her red coat was in the last stages of "blowing." Thick light colored fluffy fur covered her neck like a lion; throughout her back lay the remnants of long coarse hairs left from what was probably the fabric of a winter coat. Ribs slightly protruded, but otherwise enough meat on the bones to keep her from being called starved.

We "chatted" for a bit and I stuck my fingers through the metal bars. She sniffed, then licked the tips. Finally, standing up, I walked back to the lobby. By then another worker appeared, asking if he could help me. I explained again who I was and why I was there.

The man reached for the overflowing file box and thumbed through the sheets until he came to the form for the basenji. "Hmmm," he said, "Brought in on the 14th, no one has claimed her. Yep, she's available." "Oh yeah, the woman who brought her in said she would take her if no one claimed her."

"Well," I said, "That's certainly a possibility, but I'm more interested in just getting this dog out of here. What do I have to do, and may I take the dog outside and spend some time with her to get an idea of her nature?"

"No problem," he replied. "Just go get her and take her out through those doors" he gestured to the large entrances doors.

I went out to my van and fetched a Flexi-leash and a Premier collar. Back inside, leash in hand, I returned to the kennel room. Grace was waiting. Opening the gate, I beckoned to her. She stood quietly as I slipped the collar over her thin neck. Finished with that, we walked out of the room and started down the hallway.

Outside Grace sniffed the air and closed her eyes. "Ahhhh, the air and the sun," she seemed to say. We walked around the vast lawn; her sniffing the trees and bushes, me untangling the line at every turn. Actually she was quite the lady, just not savvy to a Flexi-leash. Each time I called her, she trotted back and stood for some ear

scratching, then stuck her nose to the ground and moved onwards. Never tugging, though.

The people at the shelter aged Grace at about four years old, but when I peered at her teeth, I had my doubts. Her canines were almost completely eroded and the incisors smooth and short. Her mouth looked like one of a ten year old dog.

However, even with the short time I spent with Grace no doubt was left in my mind that this lady had good possibilities and would be easy to place. Finally, we walked back to the kennel room. As I put Grace back in her confined quarters, I assured her I would return.

My report was positive and the Rescue Committee agreed we needed to get Grace out of the shelter and in to foster care. If boarding in the meantime was necessary, no problem. My vet clinic would board her for a few days.

Returning the next day, I signed the county forms which stated that Grace was now an official BCOSW rescue dog. A technician went back to kennel room amid a few cheers that the basenji was, indeed, being saved. Grace accompanied the technician to the office where they inserted an Avid microchip, dosed her with Frontline, and handed her over to me.

At home, I took the usual precautions, replacing my own dogs' water bowl with a pail just for Grace. Filling it with water, I set the pail on the floor in the laundry room. Grace politely waited. "Thank you," she said, and began to drink. A few tentative laps to make sure the water was to her satisfaction, then almost greedily.

"No wonder," I said to myself. All the stress of being in a shelter, dogs barking, people coming and going. Finishing her drink, Grace inspected the kitchen, sniffing everything but returning to my side for rubbing and scratching. I sat on the floor and spoke to her. After satisfying herself that this was, indeed, just a harmless kitchen, she came over to me, raised her paws on my chest and began to lick my neck and ears. "Ah yes," I said, "You are a typical basenji. What a sweetie you are and so graceful. Hmmm, I'll call you Grace."

But thirst pulled her again to the water pail. Drinking deeply, she gave a loud sigh and resumed her exploration. That done, the water pail beckoned her once more. On the third trip, I walked back to the laundry room and saw the pail was almost empty. Refilling it, she again lapped.

"Hey sweetie, with all that water, you surely need to go outside," I said as I reached for the glucose strips and the collection bowl. Slipping the collar over Grace's delicate head, bowl in hand, we walked out to the yard. Grace wandered around, sniffing bushes, trees, and just plain exploring. Finally she squatted and peed and peed and peed. The bowl was quickly filled with an almost

colorless urine.

Once inside, I let Grace free and dipped a stick in the urine. Before I could put on my glasses, the color was changing. Browner and browner and browner the small green pad changed. The stick measured over 2000 milligrams of glucose. Now I have no experience with Fanconi, but I certainly know what is likely when the glucose strip goes positive.

I was sick to the core. Fanconi is a renal tubular reabsorption failure, usually genetic in origin. Sometimes it's mistaken for diabetes as the initial symptoms are the same. Here was a very sweet basenji with all the potential for the perfect rescue dog. Who willingly gave "hugs and kisses." Who asked for nothing, accepted anything. Her liquid brown eyes said "I trust you." Nevertheless, the committee chair was expecting my report.

I picked up the phone, "Hi Claudia, this is Wanda. I have the basenji here," were my opening words to the Rescue Chairperson.

"Great, how's she doing?" Claudia asked. I described Grace, physically and mentally, leaving the bad news for last.

"Claudia, I think the dog has Fanconi." I finally admitted.

Claudia groaned. "Oh no, are you sure?" she asked. Then I told her about the glucose strip. By now Grace had left another of many huge puddles on the kitchen floor and continued to work her way through the second refill of water.

As Grace was going to the vet clinic anyway, Claudia told me to have complete chemical profile and a venous blood gas test done. For those of you who don't know (and I was one of those), a venous blood gas test isn't as simple as it sounds. Most vets don't have the equipment to run this test. This means the blood has to be taken to a local hospital, and not all hospitals will perform animal blood tests. Luckily, Dr. Chris has a working relationship with St. Anthony Hospital. Timing is another factor. Once the blood is drawn, it has to be put on ice and at the hospital within 30 minutes.

The next morning Dr. Chris drew blood from Grace and I drove to St. Anthony's with the sample. The results were back that afternoon. Grace's acidosis level was 9.1. Normal value is 0-2. The chemical panel surprised us by showing reasonable electrolyte and mineral levels. However, what did show up was an indication of mild liver damage. Furthermore, during the initial exam the vet also discovered Grace had a Grade 3 heart murmur. Was this something she was born with or was this a result of coronary damage?

Using Dr. Gonto's protocol as a guide, Dr. Chris

tried to stabilize Grace, but the floor of her run continued to be soaked and the staff struggled to keep up with her water demand. She was fed a high protein diet, but after a few days the weight was melting off her faster than she could consume food.

Meanwhile, Claudia and the rest of the rescue committee continued searching for a foster home, but to no avail. Grace would need someone who didn't work and had time to take her outside almost hourly. She would require very special care. Could we even stabilize her? Her Fanconi was very advanced. In all likelihood her mystery owner had just given up and turned her loose some time ago. Even if we did stabilize Grace, what about the heart and liver issue? And, in the end, what was her prognosis for long term survival?

Through this Grace patiently waited while the humans struggled with decisions. Caught in Grace's sweet nature I was of no use: Too emotionally drawn to saving her, but also realizing what saving her from this disease might actually mean.

In the end some will say to us, "You should have waited, tried harder, searched farther." Yet others will say, "Hey, it's for the best." And others will cast blame because they, too, know the despair and frustration of being another helpless human and must strike out at something, someone.

With the committee's decision painfully made, Monday morning I returned to Dr. Chris's office. Cindy greeted me as I walked in. "Hi Wanda, you here to take Grace home? She asked.

"Something like that. May I see Dr. Chris?" I softly responded.

Cindy ushered me to an exam room, leaving me to the silence of my surroundings. Shortly she returned with Grace. My breath caught when her curly tail twitched back and forth in recognition and she jumped in my arms. "Hi," said Grace, "I've been waiting."

Outside we strolled around the grounds. Her sniffing and me following. I couldn't help but notice Grace looked thinner; her ribs more defined. Each couple of minutes Grace would trot back to me for a nice scratch. Finally we returned to the building, Grace happy for the company of her new found friend.

Dr. Chris and Dena, her technician, came in the room and the four of us just sat and talked for a while. Grace sat in my lap appearing to search our faces. She then nuzzled my neck and began to give me those basenji kisses. We all petted her and told her how wonderful she was.

The last of the solution entered her veins and in those final two seconds of earthly peace, Grace slowly

raised her head and I felt her warm tongue softly stroke my neck one last time.

Afterwards, Grace's body lay cuddled in my lap, her spirit gone to a Perfect World. Dena said, "Wanda, she gave you one last kiss."

"I know," weakly answering her. "Grace said 'Thank you and I forgive you.'"

Grace is buried at AdventureLand. She died knowing that some humans loved and cared for her. That she counted, that she mattered. Having her here will always be a reminder that breeding is more art than science, that goals and hopes aren't always reality, and that I need to remain committed and always mindful of what may lie ahead.

*"Now you've lost the chains that bound you to
this world with all its pain,*

*And yes, your life had meaning and you did not
die in vain.*

*So run throughout the heavens, dancing in the
stars above,*

*Know that you are free, sweet Grace, and know
that you are loved."*

Poem written by Claudia Nix

