

Gentle Ben

After 20 years of working in shelters and with rescue groups, I have perfected the art of checking my emotions at the door when entering a shelter environment. I can't save them all, and the ones that I do save are often the ones that need the most attention, and most certainly the most veterinary care -- leaving very little room or money for the next homeless animal that needs me.

Every now and then, a dog or cat manages to break through the barriers I have erected, and in the summer of 2007 a pitiful black dog stared through the chain link pen with sad, sick, and pleading eyes, "Just give me one more chance," he seemed to say. My heart ached for him, but his graying muzzle, inflamed skin, oozing eyes and painful gait made it seem like there was no hope left for him, aside from the hope of a painless end to his years of suffering. I performed my duties -- I fed and watered him, walked him, scratch his ears, and patted him gently on the head, and then I tried to put him out of my mind as I punched the time clock and headed home.

I had just returned to work from a week-long vacation and was working the weekend shift alone. I didn't know the black dog's story but the red "E" on his cage told me all I needed to know. I tried to put the dog out of my mind on Saturday night, but the following day his pleading eyes followed my every step. I finally broke down and phoned my boss and asked, "What's the story on the black dog?" I wondered if "sucker" had showed up on my boss's caller ID, because she told me a story that was even more tragic than the sight of the old soul who had stolen my heart. "I want him!" I begged. She knew I would.



Ben, shortly after rescue.

Gentle Ben, a name I chose because of his demeanor, had lived his life on a chain and was then abandoned by his owners when they moved away. His age was estimated to be at least 9 years old, perhaps as old as 14. He had every parasite imaginable, including fleas and ticks, and sadly a very advanced case of heart worms. Tumors covered his body, some as small as a pea, some as large as golf ball. He had bacteria and yeast infections of the skin and ears, and thick green pus that oozed from his eyes.

With the help and advice of my veterinarian, we decided to treat the most pressing issues first -- the things that were making him uncomfortable. Although the decision was left up to me, I opted to treat the heartworms with the "slow-kill" method as I didn't think he would survive the traditional treatment, and to be honest, I didn't think he had long to live and I did not want him to live those last months in pain and confined to a crate.

An amazing thing happened along the way to recovery for Ben -- a new Ben emerged. Ben, it appears, had once lived a pampered life, he had once been loved. He knew how to sit, heel, down, stay and speak -- and that was just the beginning. Someone had trained him NEVER to get up on furniture and even though I have tried to convince him it is okay, he won't put so much as a paw up on the furniture. The same is true in my small pickup truck -- there is no coaxing him up on the seat and he manages to somehow curl up into a ball on floorboard. Taking food without verbal permission is forbidden in his mind -- I have to say "eat" before he will touch his food.

One afternoon in late fall of 2007, I was storing up all of my garden and lawn equipment for the winter. I lowered the tailgate of my pickup truck so that I could load some equipment, and when I turned my back I heard a grunt, and then a yelp. I turned to see that Ben had fallen to the ground after attempting to jump up in the back of the truck. Even before I could reach him, he was standing up and attempting to jump again. I called out his name and scolded him, in hopes that he would not attempt to jump again before I could reach him. He turned and looked at me, his heart was broken – not only had I scolded him, but I was preventing him from doing something that had obviously brought him much joy in his past life – the good life he was slowly returning to after years on a chain.

Living in rural Missouri, I have seen dogs riding in the back of an open pickup truck many times. I shuddered at the dangers that could befall a dog in this situation and have never permitted my own dogs to ride in this manner. But there was Ben, his eyes shiny with anticipation of something from years gone by, and although he did not attempt to jump again, he pleaded with me with his wagging tail and a bouncy gait I had never seen in him. There he was, his front paws leaving the ground and returning to earth with a soft grunt sounding from deep inside him. It wasn't enough for him to utilize the small muscles that control the wag of the tail, his entire rump wagged – his tail having no choice but to follow.

My heart breaking, I slapped my hand against the tailgate and he gave me a “Really, it’s okay?” look. I allowed him to put his front paws on the tailgate while I lifted (with great effort) his back end up into the truck. He quickly made his way to the back of the cab, found a comfortable sitting position, and thanked me with a few wiggles and yips. I shut the tailgate and drove the truck down the driveway and back – something that satisfied him immensely.

It’s been almost a year since I adopted Ben and most of his medical problems are under control. His heartworms prevent him from getting a lot of exercise and even when the last of the adult heartworms die off, the damage to his heart and lungs, along with his age, will likely prevent him from ever being as active as he would like, and controlling his weight has been a real challenge for me. He still lives for that short ride down the driveway to the mailbox, but if getting him into the truck isn't hard enough, getting him out is nearly impossible.

A few weeks ago I heard about a wonderful product called the [Otto Step](#). Primarily designed for an SUV or minivan, the [Otto Step](#) did offer an extension for pick up trucks. Though I would never allow Ben to ride in the back of the truck on an open highway, I find it impossible to deny him a pleasure that brings more joy to his life than even the most savory of dog treats.

I ordered the [Otto Step](#) and within minutes of the Fed Ex truck exiting my driveway I had easily attached it to the back of my truck and called Ben over for a test-ride. His first instinct was to put his paws up on the tailgate, but a quick pat on the [Otto Step](#) sent him a message to give it a try. He stepped up on the [Otto Step](#), and then onto the tailgate, and quickly found his place against the bed of the truck, wiggling and yipping in anticipation of the ride down to the mailbox. It took no coaxing at all to get him out of the truck, he stepped right onto the [Otto Step](#), just as it was designed to be used, and landed safely on the ground without so much as a grunt from him, or from me.

Throughout the brutal Midwestern winter we faced in 2007/2008, tears would often well up in my eyes as I stared at Ben while he slept in front of the electric fireplace. I thought of what his life had been like the winter before – so many winters before, and I could only imagine what dreams befell him, his paws running and short yips and growls escaping from him as he slept. I

wondered if dogs think about a past, or a future, and if he worries about going back to a life on a chain. He bears the scars of his abusive life – a large bald spot that covers the majority of his chest – a place where a collar and chain had scarred him so badly that fur would never again grow in that spot. Many times, more than I care to admit, I cried for the suffering he endured and the suffering that so many dogs endure on the end of a chain. My sorrow is multiplied by the knowledge that Ben once had a good life, a life I truly believe he remembered all of those years on a chain – never understanding what he did to deserve the drastic change from the pampered life he once enjoyed.



Ben, six months after rescue.

This story isn't just an endorsement of the [Otto Step](#) – a product that sells itself for its practicality, affordability, ease of use, and ability to protect both the dogs and the owners that use the product. This is also about the joy of adopting a senior dog, and the sorrow of the events that result in a dog ending up in a shelter. I have always had a love for dogs and although I feel like I'm betraying some of the wonderful dogs that have passed through my life in the last 40 years, I can say without hesitation that Ben is the best dog I have ever had.

No matter how much I do for Ben, I can never repay the joy he has brought in to my life. The [Otto Step](#) at least allows me to give to him the one thing he seems to love more than anything -- riding in the back of a pick up truck. I can only imagine how wonderful it must feel for a dog, the air rushing by, jowls flapping in the wind, the sights, smells and sounds that pass by, and although I can never allow him the freedom he had at one time, it seems to satisfy him to take that short ride to the mailbox, and occasionally around the farm when doing chores. I'd like to be able to say that if every dog were like Ben, we would have no homeless dogs, but of course that isn't true, or I wouldn't be so fortunate as to be sharing my life with him now. I'm just happy to know that at least one dog will live out the days he has left, happy and safe and knowing he is loved.

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Otto Step is a rescue friendly company. \$5.00 from the sale of each [Otto Step](#) is donated to the animal charity of your choice. If placing an order, be sure to fill out the [donation form](#). If you would like to designate PetShopPuppies.org as your charity, please indicate: PetShopPuppies, Inc. * 22000 State Route J * Newburg, MO 65550 * www.PetShopPuppies.org. If you are not ordering at this time, take just a moment to [thank the company](#) for their support of animal charities!