

Retriever Marea helps her family and the planet.

MYSTIC
AQUARIUM
ANIMAL
RESCUE TEAM
K9

Beauty and the Beach

There's so much that makes Rhode Island beaches special: wide swaths of sand, crashing waves, frolicking seals, glorious sunrises—and a Golden Retriever-mix named Marea.

Marea and her handler, Heather Bring, have spent the last few years working together to clear trash from beaches near their home in Weekapaug, Rhode Island. Because Marea wears the vest of a working dog, strangers often ask Bring if her dog is an emotional support animal.

"I tell them, 'Every single dog is an emotional support dog,'" she says with a laugh. "I think every human should have one. The world would be a better place."

Officially, Marea is a mobility service dog. Bring, 37, contends with a host of health issues, including a connective tissue disorder called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and a cyst that required two surgeries to implant stents into her brain. She partnered with Marea nearly three years ago.

"She is trained to help pick things up for me and kind of steady me if I get a little bit off balance. I tend to walk a little crooked sometimes, but she helps me walk in a straight line," Bring explains. "Her biggest thing is picking things up for me because bending over makes me really, really dizzy because of the pressure issues in my head, among other things. That's where we kind of got into the beach cleanup."

BEACHCOMBING

Bring was reinforcing Marea's retrieval skills when she tried having the dog pick up a piece of garbage from the beach. Having been born and raised in Hawaii, Bring has



always had a passion for marine life and the environment. When her health issues began about a decade ago and she moved to the Ocean State with her son, she still wanted to give back.

Marea, whose name means *ocean tide* in Italian, immediately took to trash collection. She wears a "pup pickup bag" on her harness so when she collects litter, Bring can hold the bag open for her to dispose of the trash. They've packed out so much garbage—beach toys, fishing lines, plastic bottles, face masks—that her family has had to rent a dumpster twice to help get rid of it.

Marea loves retrieving garbage so much that she even seeks it out—unprompted—while on vacation or camping. "She'll go running off in the woods of Vermont and

HEROES & HELPERS

come back five minutes later with an empty bottle of cooking oil to throw away,” Bring says. “It’s so incredible the way she just instinctually knows. She’s so smart, it blows my mind.”

SAVING LIVES

Bring and Marea are active volunteers with the Mystic Aquarium in Mystic, Connecticut, where her son, Jack, now 10, attended preschool. In fact, Marea was the very first dog to become a first responder for the aquarium’s Animal Rescue Program.

When a seal or other marine mammal is stranded on the beach, Bring and Marea rush to the scene to keep people from disturbing the animal until medical support can arrive. Marea never runs toward seals; instead, she digs herself a comfy hole in the sand to enjoy a *down-stay* from a safe distance.

While waiting, Bring talks to beachgoers about marine animals and the importance of keeping the ocean free of garbage, and asks them not to bother the seal. Marea lets her know if off-leash dogs are approaching so she can warn their owners to keep their dogs away to avoid a seal bite.

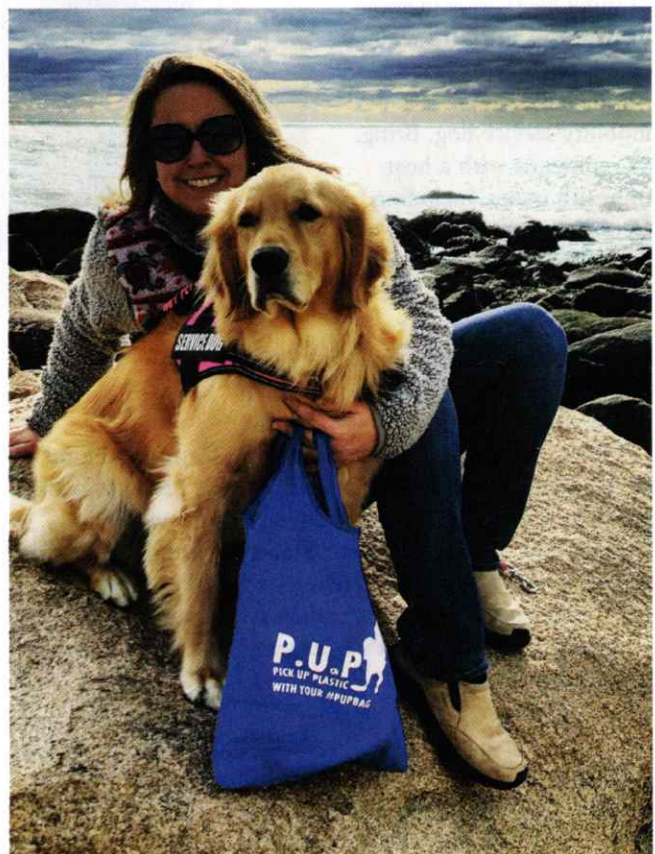
“If there’s a dog running toward us on the beach, that dog is going to run up to Marea instead of up to the seal,” she says. “It’s not helpful for those people to let their dogs run loose on the beach, but I consider that an educational moment.”

Before the coronavirus pandemic, they also volunteered in the aquarium’s animal rescue clinic, helping care for injured seals and provide enrichment for the facility’s beluga whales. A Sunday webcam caught their antics hula hooping, blowing bubbles, playing hide-and-seek, and generally entertaining viewers and whales alike. Marea even formed a friendship of sorts with her favorite whale.

“She fell in love with Juno, who is the most popular beluga whale,” Bring says. “She loves him. We’ve missed out not being able to be there.”

MOLDING THE FUTURE

Marea was also the star of “Story Time with Marea the Service Dog,” which Bring started as part of the aquar-





ium's Tuesday Toddlers programming. With Marea and Jack by her side, Bring introduced kids to Marea's work as a service dog and read them books about protecting animals and the environment.

"I can talk about conservation all day long, but if Marea is talking about conservation, that's something those kids are going to listen to," she says. "It was really cool."

Though many of their usual activities came to a screeching halt due to pandemic safety protocols, they still work to clean up the beaches in Rhode Island and Connecticut. Unfortunately, they've been finding lots of discarded face masks, which can entangle seals and smaller marine mammals, and cause serious intestinal issues for dolphins who eat them—another educational moment when they meet people on the beach.

On the plus side, Marea developed a new talent: helping Jack with remote learning when his school closed.

"Third grade was hard, so Marea helped teach third grade," Bring said. "She listened in on all his Zoom classes and she tried to get him out for PE. She's motivating for him."

Jack is an avid surfer who will paddle his board parallel to the shore while Marea happily chases alongside him. The boy and dog share a trusting relationship. In fact, one of Marea's cues is *go find Jack*.

"So if I did need him and he wasn't able to hear me or whatnot, Marea could actually go and get him and bring

him to me," she says. "Having her is helpful for him because I feel like he doesn't worry so much about me. We've been through a lot. So emotionally, she's an incredible support to both of us."

RAISING HOPES

Bring says she is blessed to have been partnered with Marea and, of course, loves her amazing dog. She says they're similarly opinionated.

"She's one of those retrievers that talks a lot. She grumbles and she purrs," Bring says. "I love it because I'll talk right back to her. We have whole conversations."

Bring maintains an active Instagram called "Marea Saves the Sea" (@mareasavesthesea) to try to spread cheer and hope

during these unprecedented times.

"I just think we can all learn a lot from our dogs, especially right now," she says. "Everybody needs to be a Golden Retriever to each other and smile at each other because we're going through a lot and everybody needs a little bit of help."

MaryEllen Mateleska, director of education and conservation at the Mystic Aquarium, considers herself lucky to have worked with Marea and Bring for the past two years. She loves seeing them in action together, whether in outreach to encourage people to use less plastic or helping find horseshoe crabs during beach surveys to count their numbers and prevent overharvesting.

"It's nice to know that Marea's got my back if I miss one," she says. "She is just the sweetest animal and an amazing ambassador for service dogs, but also just really good animals."

Mateleska feels with Marea being a "unique and special" animal and Bring being so compassionate and caring, they make a perfect pair.

"They really are an inspiration to every person who meets them," she says. "The entire family is making sure that we have a sustainable future." **FD**

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.