

 *in their*
Debt

By Jen Reeder



Rick loves everyone.

Trip

Lab inspires as ambassador for A Lab for Life Rescue in Oklahoma.

Deb Williams likes to say her yellow Lab, Rick, is “the kindest dog on the planet” – which is remarkable considering the challenges he faced in his first few years of life.

Williams is a long-time Lab rescuer and director of the nonprofit A Lab for Life Rescue in Newalla, Oklahoma. The all-volunteer group frequently shares posts about Labs in need across Oklahoma that they find on social media and try to help.

“My thought process has always been: any dog in need that’s not safe, that’s not loved, that’s being neglected or abused, needs to be saved,” she says. “So I have people contacting me all the time.”

od Rick

That's how she found out about Rick. Someone sent her a Facebook post with a photo of a yellow Lab pinned beneath a toddler straddling him like a horse.

"The people were going to rehome him," she recalled. "They said, 'He's great with dogs and kids and he has something going on with his left front leg, but it doesn't seem to bother him.'"

Williams suspected that wasn't necessarily the case, and asked a friend who lived near Rick to pick him up and transport him to her so she could assess his situation. As soon as she laid eyes on Rick, she knew something was very wrong.

"His front leg was swinging – it wasn't even like it was attached. I said, 'We need to get him to the vet right away.'"

The veterinarian determined the three-year-old Lab's leg had been badly broken about two years prior. Though he tried to save the leg, it was beyond repair and had to be amputated.

It took Rick a few months to adjust to life as a "tripod." At home with Williams and her husband Tim, Rick shied away from the half dozen other fostered Labs. He'd watch from the sidelines as they'd play. Gradually,



Deb Williams and Rick.

he learned to feel safe engaging with other dogs.

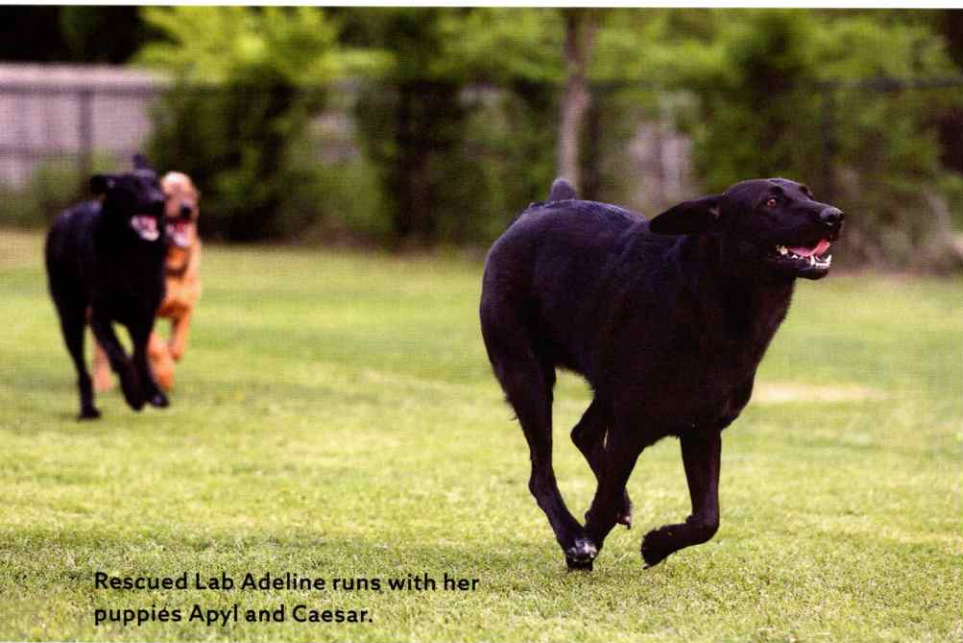
He also learned to love swimming in the couple's pool – Williams would hold up his head as he learned to paddle with only one front leg – and taking car rides. He'd put his sole front leg onto the car and she'd lift him in to go get "pup cups" or ice cream, or to pick up pallets of donated food from Greater Goods

Charity, Rachael Ray Nutrish, Chewy, and other organizations.

"Everyone loves Rick," she says.

Because Rick had been through so much, she decided to permanently adopt him. He became an ambassador for A Lab for Life Rescue with both humans and canines.

The nonprofit rescues and rehomes 350-375 Labs each year, and Williams might have up to 14 foster dogs



Rescued Lab Adeline runs with her puppies Apyl and Caesar.

on the property at any given time (as she did during an interview for this story). Whenever a new dog comes in, she promises them, “New life, baby.” Then she slowly introduces them to small groups of the other fosters on her property.

While some dogs growl or act wary during introductions – many have been mistreated and have serious injuries like Kovak, a Lab shot twice in the face as a stray – not a single dog has ever reacted negatively to Rick, and he’s never “raised a single hair” to a dog, according to Williams.

“Rick is always wagging his tail,” she says. “He’s so intuitive to other dogs. Rick’s vibe is that no one ever feels threatened. Everyone is comfortable with Rick for whatever reason.”

These days, the nine-year-old Lab is a little slower getting around. (Williams hopes to raise funds to buy him a wheelchair.) But he’s quick to wake up from a nap to follow Williams into the bathroom and wait while she showers along with the rest of the pack – “You know Labs, they’ve got to be with you wherever you go, no matter what” – or for an important morning ritual: helping her enjoy her chai tea with whipped cream.

“When he hears I have the microwave going with my water heating, he starts barking and heads for the kitchen,” she says with a chuckle. “When you have 13 or 14 dogs, they’re all vying for their spot, but they’re pretty good. Rick gets the spot just to the right of me – that’s Rick’s spot – and he gets the first squirt of whipped cream.”

While it angers her to think of sweet Rick suffering as a young Lab with an untreated broken leg, she’s incredibly grateful to the network of volunteers – and adopters – who

help her save Labs like Rick. About 30 volunteers in Oklahoma foster and transport Labs to a team of volunteers in New England and forever homes.

“There’s a huge need. I don’t think people realize how many Labs are discarded because they’re so popular,” she said. “I mean this with all my heart and soul: If I didn’t have all of the volunteers, I couldn’t have saved one dog. These people are so selfless. They have full-time jobs, they have kids, they have so much going on in their lives. I’m very, very grateful.”

Oklahoma resident Regina James has volunteered with A Lab for Life Rescue since its inception in 2020. She specializes in fostering senior dogs who need hospice care.

“Right now I have three hospice Labs, and I have no idea how long they’re going to live, but they’ve had rough lives before they came to live with me,” she says. “Even though they might pass away in my care, it’s good to know that I’ve given them the good times for whatever time that may be.”

James hopes Rick helps continue to draw attention to dogs in need – and to the fact that they’re worth saving. “I’ve known Rick since a wee babe,” she says. “He loves everybody.”

It’s a love that epitomizes the amazing resilience of rescued Labs, according to Williams.

“The very first and foremost thing that always chokes me up is the resilience of these dogs and the forgiveness that they give us. Rick should have been the most aggressive and nasty dog for everything he’s been through, and he’s the kindest soul – and never gave up and never whined and never complained,” she says. “We could learn so much from them. Despite everything they’ve been through, they still give us their trust. They still give us their love. And Rick’s the perfect example of that.” 🐾

For more information, visit: www.alabforlife.org.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed “crazy dog lady” after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.