



ROGER THAT

THE ROAD HOME: Operation Roger truckers transport rescue dogs to their forever families

By Jen Reeder
Illustration by Kim Smith

David Binz, a trucker based in Kelso, WA, cares deeply about his hitchhikers. There was Shelby, a Pekingese rescued from a tin shed in Oklahoma, who he drove to a new home in Alaska. There was Sierra, a Border Collie he drove from an animal shelter in Wyoming to a forever home in North Carolina. He fondly remembers Ginger, an elderly terrier mix whose owners gave her to a pound in Texas because she was having health problems they couldn't afford. So she rode with Binz to meet her new dad, a disabled Navy veteran in Nebraska. Binz even ended up adopting Jessie, a Pit Bull puppy he drove from Oklahoma to Washington, but whose new home didn't work out.

Binz volunteers with the nonprofit Operation Roger, a self-described "rag-tag group of some 20-30 pet-loving truckers" who transfer dogs and cats from animal shelters or individuals to new homes in the U.S. and Canada—for just a \$25 donation. The group has transported over 700 pets since its inception in September 2005.

"You're able to take this little animal and instead of it being put down somewhere, you give it to a wonderful family who will give it a great life," Binz says. "You get hooked pretty easy when you're able to have that kind of feeling over and over and over again. It's really good."

Operation Roger is the brainchild of retired trucker Sue Wiese, a Texas resident who was concerned about the pets stranded after Hurricane Katrina. She says she asked God what she could do and he said, "transport." She named Operation Roger after her beloved Manchester Terrier and began organizing a network of volunteer truckers to reunite pets who were separated from their owners during the storm. Post-Katrina, the efforts continued, now matching homeless pets with new families. It was and is tricky, since truckers cannot deviate from their scheduled work routes. Pickups and drop-offs can be at mid-day or in the wee hours of the morning, usually at truck stops and often met by volunteer shuttle drivers with four-wheeled vehicles that can navigate narrow streets that trucks can't. Operation Roger also relies on volunteers with layover homes, so that if a trucker can only get a dog as far as a certain city, another trucker can pick it up and continue the journey.

"Layovers take the pet for an indeterminate time—it could be a month or six weeks—it depends on when the next driver can get there," Wiese says. "We always have a need for layover homes, drivers, and donations."

Wiese says while Operation Roger primarily transports dogs and cats, drivers also have helped other small companion animals like birds, snakes, iguanas—even a miniature pot-bellied pig. Truckers must attend an orientation jokingly called "Operation Roger University" to prepare them for the job.

"It's things we've learned over the past eight years—what to do and what not to do in order to keep the pets, the truck, and themselves safe. The last thing they want to have to do is call the shipper and say they lost their dog," she says. ▶



Trucker David Binz's rescued canine passengers en route to their forever homes.

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She also encourages drivers to keep their trucks extra clean so that their companies don’t establish no-pets policies, which many truck companies already have in place.

Toni Bowser, lead coordinator of Operation Roger, says Operation Roger is firmly focused on transporting rescues as opposed to dogs from breeders.

“There are so many dogs that are needing homes,” Bowser says. “This is Operation Roger’s way to turn around and help the rescues get their dogs to adoptive homes...We would rather give the rescues all the help we can.”

The need for help is great: the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates three to four million dogs and cats are euthanized at animal shelters each year in the United States alone (60 percent of dogs taken to shelters and 70 percent of cats). That’s why Operation Rescue tries to attend truck shows as often as possible to try to recruit more drivers—the more drivers they have, the more animals they can save.

Operation Roger is entirely run by volunteers, so the cost to shippers (often, this is a rescue group, but sometimes an individual) is minimal. The \$25 donation barely covers phone and Internet costs associated with the transport, Wiese says. Shippers provide the pets’ food, medical records, collars, leashes, and toys while the truckers provide fresh water, exercise, and TLC along with a lift.

The recipients are invariably grateful to Operation Roger when they receive their new pets. Don Smith, a resident of Sherman Oaks, CA, received his Pit Bull Sassy in February 2013 from Operation Roger, and says he is proud to have been transport number 679.

“That means there were 678 extremely happy human beings and saved puppies before me,” he says. “Operation Roger is absolutely fantastic—I cannot praise them enough.”

Sassy was about nine months old and living in Oklahoma when her owner became homeless right as he learned he was terminally ill, so he surrendered her to a shelter so that she wouldn’t have to live on the streets. Smith saw Sassy’s photo online through a Pit Bull rescue group and “fell in love.” He told Operation Rescue’s Bowser “Get her to California and I’ll take her,” and about 10 minutes later, Bowser responded, “I can do that.”

It wasn’t a fast process—it took a month and a half for a driving team’s schedule to work out—but it did happen. Operation Roger drivers Frank Rinchiuso Jr. and Jenny Lee Burdett picked up Sassy in Oklahoma and texted a photo of her to Smith with the note: “Here she is. She’s coming.”

Like all Operation Roger dogs, she rode in the cab with the drivers, who continued texting updates to Smith every few hours, either about her behaviour (“She’s not eating right now;” to 10 minutes later: “She just had a piece of pizza crust;” to 30 minutes later: “Oops, she threw up”) or their progress on the road.

“My sweetheart rode in the cab with them. There is no crate, the dog is up in the cab with them getting love, getting treats, just being spoiled every inch of the way,” Smith says. “These aren’t just a bunch of people that are doing this so they get notoriety. These are people that have this in their hearts to help reunite animals with a loving home.”

Smith drove over 100 miles to meet Sassy and the Operation ▶

“These are people who do this out of the goodness of their hearts. If more people did things like this—I’m not talking just about animals, but in general—our world would be a much better place.”

Roger team at a truck stop at 10 o’clock at night—recipients must agree to meet the truckers whenever and wherever their schedule allows—and hasn’t looked back. He says Sassy is a “Daddy’s girl” who sleeps in bed every night with him under the covers, and gets along well with his other dogs and cat. He plans to train her to be a therapy dog. He gives updates to Rinchioso, who calls from time to time to check in on Sassy and see how she and Smith are doing.

“I am absolutely in love and feel so blessed to have this little sweetheart in my life, and to have met and be connected with such an absolutely wonderful organization,” Smith says. “These are people who do this out of the goodness of their heart. If more people did things like this—I’m not talking just about animals, but in general—our world would be a much better place.”

Glenn Whitecotton, a trucker based in Roswell, NM, has volunteered with Operation Roger since it started in 2005. Since then he’s transported around 40 dogs and six chinchillas (South American rodents) for the group. Whitecotton, who drives an average of 150,000 miles a year, says he thinks he gets more out of it than the dogs.

“I’m 69, so I’m just like a grandpa—I get a dog on the truck and I spoil it. They wind up sleeping with me and everything,” Whitecotton says. “I fall in love with all of them. I even cried once.”

The dog with whom it was so difficult to part was Buddy, a Boxer stray he picked up in Utah.

“He was real skinny and underweight, so every morning I would give him a sausage/egg biscuit. And every morning he expected it—he was smelling in my pockets or wherever I had it. ‘Where’s my sausage/egg biscuit?’” Whitecotton says with a laugh.

They spent 15 days together driving from Utah to Oregon to Colorado to Texas to Indianapolis and, finally, Chicago, IL, where Whitecotton turned Buddy over to another Operation Roger driver to help him reach his new family in Maine.

“He probably gained five pounds in the 15 days because I made sure he had something to eat,” Whitecotton says. “The people that he finally went to, they said every morning they had to give him a sausage/egg biscuit.”

He says it is rewarding to witness reunions between dogs and their owners who have been temporarily separated by circum-



From top: Trucker David Binz with rescue pup Sierra, one of the 11 pets (10 dogs and one cat!) that made up his first transport for Operation Roger, along with Sierra’s new mom, Sharon. Don Smith, a resident of Sherman Oaks, CA, received his rescued Pit Bull Sassy from Operation Roger in February, 2013.

stances like divorce, as well as first-time encounters, and to share a camaraderie with other Operation Roger drivers, who share information and sometimes even meet for lunch on the road when their schedules allow.

“It’s like a fraternity between the drivers,” he says.

Whitecotton says there are even health benefits to transporting dogs. He stops every two hours to walk the dogs he transports, which in turn forces him to exercise. The dogs can also act as protective guard dogs, and help pass the long hours on the road.

“When you’ve got the dog on board, you’ve got somebody to talk to,” Whitecotton says. “I think everybody ought to have a dog on a truck.” ■

➤➤ **Go! Operation Roger volunteers hope to transfer 900 pets by their ninth anniversary on September 16, 2014. For more information or to get involved, visit operationroger.rescuegroups.org.**