

These  
Precious  
Days

*Like wine, a dog's love gets better with age.*

By Jen Reeder



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hen Maria and Steve Hidalgo bought a house in 2016, their daughter decided it was time for the family to

get their first dog. Jordan, now 14, even created a compelling PowerPoint presentation arguing her case. Her parents agreed but had reservations.

“We were nervous,” Maria Hidalgo recalls. “We wanted to make sure we did this right.”

They decided to open their home to a bonded pair of Shih Tzu mixes named Lilo and Stitch. The dogs were seniors—Lilo was 12 and Stitch was 13—so they were already housetrained and needed little exercise. They keep each other company, often cuddling during naps, while the family is at work and school.

Hidalgo says their two “little old roommates” are a perfect addition to the family.

“They’re good with new people coming in—they don’t bark. They’re very gentle and good with all ages,” she says. “They are adorable, social, very happy-go-lucky ... They are the easiest dogs. It’s a joy to have them.”

Lilo and Stitch—yes, the family loves watching the Disney movie with them—have distinct personalities. Stitch, the male, is an “old soul” who tilts his head in curiosity—particularly when it’s 5:30 p.m. and he starts giving his trademark “huff” for dinner.

Lilo, on the other hand, still acts like a puppy sometimes, chasing after balls and toys. Then she’ll doze for six or seven hours.

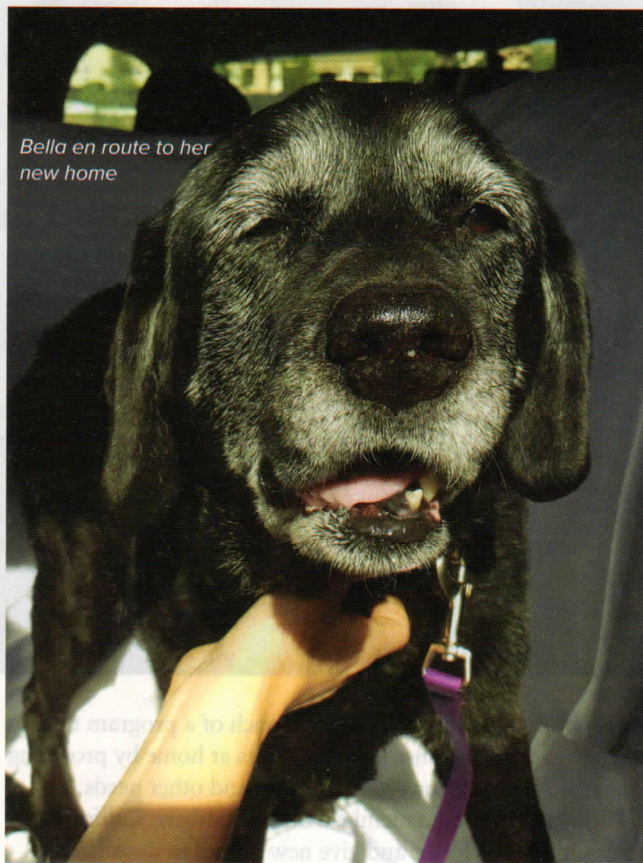
“They are the love of our lives,” she says. “I think once we got them we were now complete. We have our two dogs, we have our family, we have the house, we’re good to go.”

## OLD, NOT OVER

The Hidalgos would not have found Lilo and Stitch if it weren’t for an elderly pit bull named Lionel. Back in 2011, California resident Laura Oliver and her family took in the 15-year-old dog. Though he had terminal cancer and veterinarians thought he would only live for a couple of months, he gained weight, started taking family walks, and lived another eight months.

“It was a true gift to have him,” she says. “Having small children, you’re always trying to keep up with the pace of life and everything that’s going on, and he really forced us to slow down because his pace was very different.”

The experience affected Oliver so deeply that she founded Lionel’s Legacy Senior Dog Rescue, a nonprofit in San Diego, California, that rehomes senior dogs and educates elementary school students about the importance of treating animals hu-



*Bella en route to her new home*

manely. The all-volunteer group also helps keep elderly dogs from being relinquished to shelters by providing financial support to human senior citizens facing challenges, such as paying for veterinary expenses, pet food, and supplies.

“I equate it to people. If you have the ability to give your loved one the end of their life in a home environment—comfortable—that’s always the best scenario,” Oliver says. “These pets should be able to enjoy the end of their lives comfortably.”

While there aren’t statistics on the total number of elderly dogs that need to be rehomed each year, one study of data from 50 organizations showed the rehome rate for senior dogs (ages 7 and up) was just 25 percent—less than all other age groups combined. It also found the live release rate for seniors was lower than for other groups: 56.5 percent.

Rescue groups, shelters, and animal sanctuaries are increasingly working to address this issue. In 2019, The Grey Muzzle Organization, a nonprofit that awards grants aimed at saving at-risk senior dogs, received nearly 250 applications from animal welfare groups across the country with innovative programs to help old dogs. For instance, The Grey Muz-





*Twinkle's wisdom and sweet smile helped a young girl through a hard time. Below: Mac assumed the role of "mother hen" in his new home.*

zle supported the Lionel's Legacy launch of a program to help seniors on fixed incomes keep their pets at home by providing financial assistance for veterinary care and other needs.

Clearly, the devoted members of the Southern California community who foster and give new homes to dogs from Lionel's Legacy love seniors. Lindy Kalpakoff and her husband Ed have 15 senior dogs who came from the group, including nine Great Danes, a Doberman, a German Shepherd mix, and four Boxers. Their newest addition, a 9-year-old Boxer named Penny, came into their home as their Boxer, Sam, was given a month to live due to a mass on his spleen.

"She brought so much joy into our home at a very sad time, but most important, she brought a sparkle back into Sam's eyes! He loved having her by his side," she says. "He passed away at the end of April and we know he outlived his prognosis because of Penny."

## SHINE ON

After Penny healed from surgery for a broken leg, her personality really began to

shine. She loves watching TV with her head on Ed's shoulder, dressing up, and visiting neighbors from the comfort of her stroller when she tires on walks due to the plate in her leg. While she might be the most soulful dog they've had, she also has a silly side.

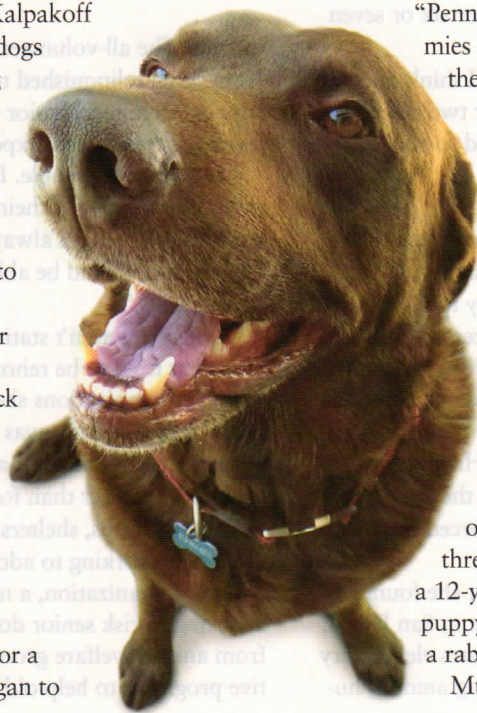
"Penny's 9 years old, yet she prances, and she shimmies and she wiggles her butt all the way across the floor," Kalpakoff says. "It's just amazing."

While it's always painful to lose a beloved dog, Kalpakoff says the reward outweighs the sadness.

"The love that a senior dog has, it's something. They need you as much as you need them. I like to nurture them and see them thrive," she says. "You help them, and love them, and make every day good for them. And when they leave, you know that you made them happy."

Elizabeth Zwolle says she and her family—mother Janet; daughter Julianna, 10; and son Joshua, 7—love having a mix of pets to care for. At the moment, they have three Labrador Retrievers from Lionel's Legacy, a 12-year-old Boxer raised from the time he was a puppy, two pit bull puppies, two guinea pigs, and a rabbit.

Murphy, a yellow Lab who is 9 or 10 years old,



COURTESY ELIZABETH ZWOLLE



most recently joined the pack. Like the other senior Labs, she's patient with the rambunctious puppies and even tries to play with them. Bella, a black Lab adopted at age 15 a year ago, lets them climb all over her—nothing bothers the sweet old gal. Mac, the approximately 11-year-old chocolate, has assumed the role of “mother hen,” Zwolle says.

“When I first got him, he laid down on the floor and they both came to him and cuddled up next to him,” she says. “He just takes care of them, watches over them, and sleeps in my bed with them.”

## WISDOM OF AGES

The animals teach the children responsibility and that “old dogs have worth.” In fact, one of their former Labs named Twinkie helped Julianna through a challenging time after a traumatic experience. The young girl told her doctor about how much Twinkie loved tennis balls, and he gave her an entire bag to bring home.

“Twinkie knew something was wrong and stayed by her side and the side of her bed,” she recalls. “She was just there for my daughter through that difficult time. Julianna made a complete 180 and is back to her normal self again. A dog was able to help get her through it.”

Ally Godinho says senior dogs and cats have helped her kids learn compassion and that “when something gets old, we don't just discard it.” The family, which includes her husband Jeff and children Ryan, 30; Kara, 29; Owen, 14; and Elle, 12, has had over 30 dogs and cats in the last 20 years.

They recently adopted Bella, a 13-year-old Golden Retriever, from Lionel's Legacy because as she notes, “I have a weakness for Golden Retrievers.”

While veterinary and rescue organizations typically designate dogs aged 7 and up as “seniors,” Godinho also has a weakness for what she calls “super seniors”—dogs who might be termed “geriatric” or even “hospice” by others.

“When I look at an old dog, I think they're cuter than puppies. There's just something so sweet about them and I like the energy level that they have—or don't have,” she says. “I'm just drawn to them.”

Max, an Akita mix, had his eyes surgically removed after being rescued from a hoarder, yet still loved everybody and inspired Godinho's younger children's classmates on school visits. Nadia, a white Shepherd mix adopted around age 13, was incredibly sweet and gentle. Grady, a 15-year-old Golden Retriever, was found wandering in the mountains but the “special” dog lived to be 17 years old with the Godinhos.

“I think with older animals, you kind of get what you see

“The love that a senior dog has, that's something. They need you as much as you need them.”

when you meet them,” she says. “And you can teach them new tricks.”

San Diego resident Jen Triem says she likes to always keep her county's legal limit of six pet dogs. She recently adopted a roughly 8-year-old pit bull named Tommy after the loss of her beloved 12-year-old chocolate Labrador Retriever, Brownie. Tommy helped her through her grief and fits in great with the rest of the pack: an 11-year-old Chihuahua and her two 7-year-old sons, an 11-year-old Chihuahua mix, and an 11-year-old Border Collie mix.

“Tommy is so darn cute and sweet,” she says. “He's similar to all the other senior dogs I have had from a temperament standpoint. He just wants love, and to lie around and have a nice warm bed and food.”

Triem says the private Facebook group for Lionel's Legacy families is strong. Members share experiences, resources, and advice with one another. For instance, one of her late dogs had severe dementia that manifested by the dog getting stuck in a corner and pacing, unsure of where she was. The online community helped her recognize the source of the problem since it was her first experience dealing with it.

While there can be challenges caring for senior dogs, such as administering medications or dealing with incontinence, Triem says that's a “minor inconvenience” at the end of the day.

“A senior dog is such a great companion,” she says. “It's not always easy, but it's always rewarding.” **FD**

For more information, visit:  
[lionelslegacy.org/](http://lionelslegacy.org/)

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Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is Immediate Past President of the Dog Writers Association of America. She shares her home office in Colorado with her husband and two senior dogs, Rio and Peach.