



# SECOND CHANCE DOGS

(and the people they're saving along the way)

Zach Skow and rescue dog Hooch

PHOTO ABBY'S PHOTOGRAPHY

## Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue offers second chances, not just to abused and abandoned dogs, but to people too

By Jen Reeder

You'd never guess that Zach Skow almost died six years ago. The handsome thirty-something is typically seen skateboarding, running up California hillsides to train for marathons, and volunteering in his community with dogs he's rescued for his nonprofit, Marley's Mutts.

But Skow spent his 29th birthday in the hospital, his liver failing from years of alcohol abuse. Doctors told him he would die without a liver transplant, but that he would have to be sober for six months to even qualify.

"I was not healthy enough for a transplant. I was just depleted, physically, mentally, spiritually—I kind of had nothing left," Skow said. "When I got released (after two months in the hospital), the instructions were to go home and try and survive another four months...That was a daunting task, and I was physically as ill as you can imagine somebody. Literally, I'm not exaggerating, I looked like a dead person."

There were many days when Skow couldn't move out of bed and didn't want to. But his rescued dogs Marley, a Rottweiler/Pit Bull mix, and Tug, a Lab mix, wouldn't give up on him.

"My dogs didn't leave my side the whole time," Skow said. "I just couldn't deny the love that was there."

His dogs never gave up hope, wagging their tails each morning to ask for a walk. Slowly, Skow started taking them for sunrise strolls and, eventually, hikes in the mountains near his home in Bakersfield, CA.

"They got me out walking at sunrise and it is impossible not to find some kind of worth in yourself and in life when you go for a walk in the mountains at sunrise," Skow said. "They pushed me out the door and kept me doing it every day, several times a day. I just started to get better. After a couple of months, I started to get rapidly better...They basically taught me that every single day is a new day, and every single day is wonderful, and everything is possible."

The following year, Skow was so healthy that he no longer needed a liver transplant. Inspired by his personal experience, he founded the nonprofit Marley's Mutts Dog Rescue, named for his beloved dog Marley who coaxed him from death's doorstep. It started small; Skow and his father rescued dogs scheduled for euthanasia from local shelters, then fostered and trained them before finding them new homes. Today Marley's Mutts consists of a network of around 30 volunteer foster families who have saved approximately 2,000 dogs from death row. Marley and Tug help keep the foster dogs in line on Skow's three-acre property, a skill at which Marley, in particular, immediately proved adept.

"Marley was just a great pack general—he helped me keep the peace. He didn't stand for fighting," he said. "He liked even-keel, pack-symbiotic harmony, and he helped me to maintain that."

Skow said many of Marley's Mutts were formerly abused—at least 20 have had gunshot wounds; others have been mutilated as "bait dogs" for dogfights. But instead of ▶



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succumbing to anger at these dogs' treatment, Skow focuses on their rehabilitation.

"I'm very aware of my job: my job is to rehabilitate. And there's where the joy comes from—watching them get better," he said.

Skow's favourite activities help rehabilitate dogs and people simultaneously. Several days a week, Skow and several dogs take a ride in the "Mutt Mobile" and visit community non-profits that support survivors of domestic violence, the homeless, people battling addictions, and children with disabilities. Skow said it's been particularly rewarding to see improvement in nonverbal autistic children since they've been interacting with Hooch, a French Mastiff who, horrifically, had his tongue and ears cut off by his abusive former owner when he was just a puppy. (Skow has permanently adopted him.)

"Hooch is unbelievable—he lets these kids crawl all over him," Skow said. "To see (the kids') social progress when we come back and visit and see how they're more aware of boundaries and better capable of compassion...it's wonderful."

As a result, Skow said the motto of Marley's Mutts, which started as "All breeds, all creeds," is evolving into "Rescuing dogs, rescuing people." What has surprised him most about the group is how important Marley's Mutts is to people's daily lives—the online "Mutt Militia" of nearly 100,000 supporters is extremely active on the Marley's Mutts Facebook page.

"Mutt Militia is just the people who are down for the cause—anybody that checks in and shares our stuff and is involved in whatever way they can be," Skow said.

Members of the Mutt Militia often contact Skow to share ways reading the success stories of rehabilitated dogs have brought them hope. One woman even told him that following updates on the progress of Little Bear, a mixed breed dog who needed skin grafts after being mauled by another dog, kept her from killing herself. The Mutt Militia donated an incredible \$17,000 for Little Bear's surgeries, and now he is happy and healthy in his forever home.

"We want people to see these resilient stories of success and the unbelievable victories," Skow said. "So many people are

involved with these journeys that each dog is on...there's such magical group efforts."

Shadow, a Pit Bull/Lab mix, is another Marley's Mutts alum with a terrible start in life but a happy ending. Late last year, hikers found her abandoned in the high desert locked in a small cage with two other dogs—one was dead, and Shadow and the other dog had injured one another by fighting while confined in such close quarters.

Skow got a call from a friend in Animal Control and drove two hours to meet the dogs at a shelter, where he said they were "red zone shut down—very aggressive if put with one another, but glued to the floor otherwise."

Skow spent a few hours walking with purpose to try to infuse them with confidence, and eventually got them into the Mutt Mobile and to a veterinarian, who said the wounds seemed superficial. Skow decided to foster Shadow because she was the more aggressive dog, and for several months she ran long

distance with him while he trained for marathons.

"She did everything with me," he said. "And we got her in good with the pack here at the house so she wasn't being possessive and didn't have any separation anxiety."

In January 2014, Shadow had improved so much that she was ready to be adopted, and Robbie Miller called to set up a meeting with her. Just a few weeks earlier, the former gang member had been released from prison after serving over 12 years. He'd asked his mom if he could get a dog because he'd seen so many offenders return to the penitentiary after their releases, and he thought a dog could help him adjust to his new life.

"After you've been gone for 12 years, the social skills and communication and all that is awful, you know?" Miller said.

His mother agreed and they drove to meet Shadow.

"Immediately it was like we were meant for each other," Miller said.

The two became inseparable—hiking, fishing and spending as much time together as possible. But a few months later when Miller was at work, his mom noticed Shadow coughing up blood. X-rays showed she had a bullet lodged in her lung, and would need to have her lung removed. Miller was worried because he didn't have money for an operation since he'd just gotten out of



**A Marley Mutt's success story: Phoenix, a Pit Bull/Corgi mix, nursed back to health after surviving a fire in which nine of her littermates perished.**



**Zach Skow and Shadow, both with a new lease on life.**

prison. He called Skow, who told him, “Don’t worry about it—I got you.”

Skow flew with Shadow to Los Angeles for the surgery, and

put out a call for help on the Marley’s Mutts Facebook page. The Mutt Militia stepped up to the plate, filling Miller with relief and gratitude.

“People from all around the world donated money—it covered it within two or three days,” he said.

Shadow pulled through and now she and Miller are closer than ever. “Shadow’s been a real help for me because after twelve years locked up, sometimes I don’t like being around people,” Miller said. “I always feel like people are judging me or stuff like that. She makes it easier for me—she doesn’t care, all she wants is for me to love her.”

One person that Miller does feel comfortable around is Skow (who feels the same way. He said simply, “We’re brothers now.”). Miller said Skow has a “great heart.”

“He’s more than just a dog rescuer. He helps people out too,” Miller said. “He goes out of his way to do good things for this world.” ■

» For more information about Marley’s Mutts, visit [marleymutts.com](http://marleymutts.com) or join the Mutt Militia at [facebook.com/MarleysMuttsDogRescue](https://facebook.com/MarleysMuttsDogRescue).



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