

The soft-eyed brown pit bull tugged
at his heart—and set off a life-changing
chain of events

For the Love of Lilly

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW

David Lanteigne never intended to adopt another pet when he visited Boston's Animal Rescue League in March 2009. His golden retriever Penny was as much as he could manage in his cozy East Boston apartment. But, he figured, he could still volunteer to walk the shelter dogs, and make them feel cared for.

Touring the facility, the then 25-year-old Boston police officer

spied a sweet brown five-year old pit bull named Lilly in a kennel at the back, and knelt down to say hi. "She had the prettiest eyes," he recalls. As he reached in to pet her, she pushed her neck up to the grate. He noticed some scars on her head—had she been abused? She so craved the little bit of warmth and affection he could offer through the cage door. Something about her tugged at his heart. He hated having to leave her there.

He thought of his mom, Christine

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David Lanteigne hadn't intended to adopt a dog but something about Lilly tugged at his heart.

Spain, who, in her own way, was as trapped by forces beyond her control as Lilly—and in as much need of someone to love.

Christine had battled alcoholism and mental illness all her adult life. She'd lost everything as a result—even her children. David and his sister were sent to live with their grandparents when he was just six years old. He never gave up on his mother though. He'd ride his bike the five miles to visit her in the next town. And it was so wonderful to share loving moments with her, he could forget the times he found her unconscious on a floor scattered with empty beer cans.

But that was the past. He felt a mixture of pride and relief knowing she'd given up drinking more than two years before. Still, anxiety and depression kept her from going out, meeting new people.

Having a dog to care for would give her a reason to get out and socialize. And his mom would be a lifesaver for Lilly.

He brought Christine to meet Lilly the following week, and she was just as taken with the dog as her son had been. So, Lilly joined the family. On Lanteigne's days off, Lilly would stay with him and Penny, her new best friend. But mostly, she lived with Christine in the rambling white house across from the train station in the New England town of Shirley, Massachusetts.

And David was right: they were

good for each other. Devoted to her care, Christine took Lilly everywhere, cooked her special meals, cuddled beside her at night. She even came out of her shell a bit, chatting with people she and Lilly met on their walks. All seemed well at last.

ON MAY 3, 2012, David started his shift at midnight, walking a beat in the rough and tumble Boston neighborhood of Mattapan. In his six years on the force, he'd seen it all. Nothing, he thought, could shake him—until a text came in from a friend who worked as an paramedic in Shirley, 50 miles away.

"Your mother almost got hit by a train," reported the friend. "She's unhurt, but the dog with her wasn't so lucky. Seems it lost a paw."

A quick call to the local police gave him the details. A freight train was steaming past the Shirley station when the engineer spied a woman up ahead, passed out on the tracks, a brown dog by her side. The dog pushed and pulled, frantically trying to move her. The massive engine's brakes screeched. Just before the train stopped, the engineer felt a thump. Racing back on foot, he expected to see two dead bodies.

But Lilly had somehow gotten Christine off the track just in time.

Still incoherent from drink, Christine had been arrested. Lilly had been taken to an emergency veterinarian.

Lanteigne left his shift and sped

west to Shirley, choking back sobs, furious at his mother for putting herself in danger, and tormenting himself about letting her adopt Lilly.

David arrived to find Lilly still in the animal control officer's car. Though battered and bloody, when she saw him, her tail began to wag. As he picked her up, a makeshift bandage fell from her mangled leg. David gently placed Lilly in the back of his SUV, then raced back the way he came.

At the Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston, doctors told him Lilly's

enough time to shower before reporting for an overtime shift so he could start earning the extra money he'd need to pay the vet bills.

No more than an hour into his shift, the hospital called. Lilly's front right leg could not be saved. Of more concern were her hindquarters. She had multiple fractures of her left hip and pelvis. She'd need major surgery to repair the damage.

First, Lilly had to survive the amputation, the doctor explained. If she did, they'd wait a day or two, operate



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right front paw had been “degloved”—the skin, muscle and connective tissue sheered away. But there was a possibility that her leg could be saved—doctors wouldn't know for sure until the x-rays were done.

As Lilly was wheeled into intensive care, David applied for a \$4,000 loan—the estimated cost of the amputation, if it had to be done. At last, done with the paperwork, he was able to visit her. She had a multitude of tubes and IVs in her. She whimpered despite the pain medication. But she was stable. And she seemed to take comfort in his presence.

Too soon, as the city stirred awake to another morning, he had to leave her. Hustling home, he had just

on her hindquarters, and insert a steel plate to help her support her weight.

David's spirits sank as he absorbed the news. If she lived, he asked, would she be able to walk? The doctor couldn't guarantee it.

Would it be fair to put her through more pain, only to have her die on the operating table? What if she was left with just one good leg out of four?

He didn't want Lilly to suffer any more, but she'd made it this far. It shouldn't be for nothing. Lilly had her right front leg, including the shoulder, amputated the following morning.

Through the steel grate of her cinder block kennel after the surgery, David saw a shaved, bruised dog, tubes and needles everywhere, and stitches



Today, Christine is ever more dedicated to Lilly - and to her own health.

where her leg had been. “She looked like Frankenstein.”

On Saturday, May 5, surgeons operated on her hip and pelvis. So damaged was the top of the hip joint, it had to be cut away.

But she’d made it through. Now, there was one big test left: would she walk again?

Word spread around Angell Animal Medical Center about the hero dog who’d rescued her owner from the train tracks. Rob Halpin, Angell’s public relations director, asked Lanteigne if he’d be willing to share Lilly’s story with the media. It would help counter the unfair stigma pit bulls face, Hal-

pin told him, that often prevented them from being adopted.

David agreed. At first, he sat down with local interviewers but once the news of Lilly’s heroism spread, Angell started getting calls from reporters around the world. Halpin set up a fund for Lilly’s care.

Within four days about \$76,000 had been donated, more than enough to cover Lilly’s hospital bills as well as the extensive physical therapy she’d need. Angell would set aside the balance of donations to help other animals whose owners could not otherwise afford their care.

Finally, a little more than a week after the accident, Angell’s doctors decided she could go home. She couldn’t yet stand, but she had started to move her back legs. It seemed a good sign.

At home, completely helpless, Lilly needed round-the-clock care. Christine moved into her son’s condo and committed herself to Lilly’s recovery. She cooked her special meals of boiled chicken, sweet potatoes, and rice. Lilly needed a multitude of pills—antibiotics, painkillers, anti-inflammatories—which Christine conscientiously administered. Lilly couldn’t move by herself, and Christine didn’t want her to have to sleep alone. She snuggled in with the dog at night on the hardwood floor.

Though they never spoke about what happened that night on the railroad tracks, David overheard Christine call Lilly, “my little lifesaver,” and her dedication to the dog said more than words.

And yet, it would all be for nothing if physical therapy couldn’t get Lilly back on her feet again.

Several days after her discharge from Angell, David carried Lilly into the Paws in Motion rehabilitation center, and gently placed her on the floor. The most physical therapist Dr. Suzanne Starr could do with Lilly that first day was to massage, flex and extend her legs.

At her next session, Dr. Starr placed Lilly onto the underwater treadmill. And, for a few brief moments, the buoyancy of the water allowed the pit bull to stand and walk upright on her own without falling. But outside the water, Lilly was as immobile as before, unable to bear her own weight on her remaining three legs.

Christine diligently helped Lilly do the stretching exercises prescribed by Dr. Starr. Together, mother and son learned how to “walk” her. With one person at Lilly’s front and the other at her back, they carried her in a specially designed dual harness.

One sunny June[?] afternoon, David brought the two dogs to a park in downtown Boston. Lilly was lounging in the grass in her harness, Penny nearby, when a woman stopped on the sidewalk and stared, evidently rec-

ognizing them, thanks to all the media attention Lilly had gotten.

The woman began walking toward them, beaming a warm, inviting smile, then opened her arms wide and called out: “Lilly!”

Lilly’s face lit up as it always did. But as David watched, stunned, Lilly pushed herself up and, wobbly as can be, took half a dozen steps on her three remaining legs to greet the woman.

Reacting quickly, he reached out to support the dog, frightened that she’d collapse. And just as quickly, joy swept away the fear.

Everything was going to be all right. Lilly was going to make it. She would walk again.

Lilly still divides her time between her two homes in Shirley and East Boston, happily getting around on her three legs. She also makes appearances for a charity, Lilly The Hero Pit Bull, that advocates on behalf of pit bulls, raises money for their medical expenses, and helps them find new homes. Christine Spain is again sober and doing well.