

Sue's story: A foster carer's journey

I lost my beloved Mayhew rescue dog, Cassie, last November and was looking out for another dog to adopt. Being Mayhew's Receptionist meant I was in the best place to find my new companion. Then came lockdown.

Like many of us, I needed some doggy cuddles - especially as I live on my own and was working from home too. So I got in touch with Mayhew's Dog Foster Coordinator and she told me about a special case - a sweet little dog called Dora. Dora's background meant that she'd lost her confidence and was extremely nervous. She was especially scared of strangers, and Maria told me I'd need to meet her several times to gain her trust before she could come home with me.

I leapt at the chance - even though it meant several early morning dashes to Mayhew to meet Dora, then back to my home desk for 9am to be ready for calls to our reception.

I remember sitting on the grass in the Mayhew garden, waiting to meet Dora for the first time. When Dora came out with a member of the Mayhew team, I was careful not to move or look at her. I've fostered nervous dogs before but I hadn't seen a dog as scared as Dora for some time.

I held out my hand and offered Dora some chicken, her favourite food. But she was too frightened to come near me. So I threw a some bits on the floor a few feet from where I was sitting. She darted forward to grab them but quickly jerked away again. I met Dora 15 times in total and each time I'd throw tasty chicken pieces just by me on the floor. Gradually she moved closer but still too nervous to make contact.

As Dora became more relaxed around me, I could see glimpses of her personality coming through. One time, I was moving very slowly so as not to startle her, carefully placing pieces of chicken on the ground. Suddenly Dora did a sharp bossy bark and looked at me impatiently, as if to say, 'come on woman, just throw the chicken will you!'

Eventually, the day came when Dora took a piece of chicken off my leg, and then from my outstretched hand - I felt like I'd won the lottery! We made fast progress from then on, with Dora allowing me to gently stroke her. She finally learnt to trust me, and the time had arrived for her to come home with me.

To my delight, Dora seemed quite at home with me from day one - but outside was another matter. Everyday noises that wouldn't startle most dogs sent Dora into a panic. It could be something as innocuous as a car driving by or someone quietly walking past.

So, I spent a lot of time sitting with Dora just outside my basement flat, giving her pieces of chicken to foster a sense of safety and wellbeing when she was outside. Eventually, she found a little bit of confidence and would walk a short way along the quieter side streets close to where I live. But she wouldn't venture near the main road.

I soon realised that Dora was a lot braver with other dogs around. So we'd walk with my neighbours and their dogs. We even visited a local dog-walking spot and Dora really perked up! She even accepted walking along a short stretch of path by a busy road, just the two of us, to get to what is now her 'happy place'.

I'll miss Dora so much when she goes to live with her forever family. She melted everyone's heart, not just because she's very cute, or because of her sad story, but mainly because of how very valiant she is. I saw it in her - how she tried so hard to be brave, and her personality was bubbling away waiting to come out. She really is a very plucky little dog, and I'm so glad I got the chance to join the many Mayhew staff who have helped her happy, loving and sometimes cheeky self, shine through.

Thank you