

Wisconsin Adopt A Golden Retriever celebrates 5 years since helping first Golden

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Barkley is thankful for Wisconsin Adopt A Golden Retriever (WAAGR). He was one of the first two Golden Retrievers rescued by the organization after he was turned down by another rescue. Turns out he was quite the catch and found his forever home with one of WAAGR's members.

Honey is one of the first seven puppy mill rescues WAAGR helped. Life in a barn turned into life full of love once WAAGR found her. She had to be taught about the pleasures of a Golden life starting at age 7. Eating out of a bowl, walking on a leash and sleeping indoors were just some of the lessons she had to learn. She's a happy Golden who loves an occasional homemade waffle snack in her forever home.

Tinker is a Golden mix who was helped after being shot with a BB gun. Due to her injury, she needed to have her right eye removed. When she went into surgery, one of the vet employees fell in love with Tinker and wanted to adopt her. She has recovered from her surgery and is in a happy, loving home with the vet employee who fell for her.

These are just a few of the hundreds of Golden Retrievers and Golden mixes WAAGR has helped since taking in Barkley in May 2005. Celebrating its 5th anniversary since that time, WAAGR shows no signs of slowing down. The nonprofit rescue group, based in southeastern Wisconsin, has the simple motto: "Providing Bright New Beginnings To Displaced Golden Retrievers." The group of volunteers continues to live up to its motto as it helps Golden Retrievers and Golden mixes find their forever homes.

Since first rescuing Barkley in 2005, WAAGR has helped approximately 650 dogs. Each year, the organization spends \$600 on average per Golden that comes through.

Who comprises WAAGR's membership?

WAAGR has approximately 350 supporting members, and 30 active members. While the organization is based in southeastern Wisconsin, there are volunteers in the Madison area and the Fox Cities/Green Bay areas of the state. Volunteers can help in many areas including special events, home visits (when volunteers visit families interested in adopting from WAAGR), fundraising, transporting Golden Retrievers and of course, foster care. Volunteers also can serve on the Board of Directors, which oversees the organization.

"Fostering is one of the areas that we are always looking for volunteers in," WAAGR President Craig Cwiklowski said. His home in Franksville, Wis. is one of 40 trained foster homes. "We look for dog savvy people who have a passion for Golden Retrievers. But who doesn't love a Golden?"

WAAGR Rescue Director Mary Schmittinger, Colgate, Wis., is a charter member of the organization who has been involved in rescue for 10 years. She is active in many areas of the group and has appeared on TV for the organization on numerous occasions with her Golden, Trapper John.

"While our volunteers are all over the state, we stay well connected through email and our member message board," Schmittinger said. "Everyone provides a different piece to the rescue puzzle and shares one common bond: A love for Golden Retrievers. We wouldn't have been able to do what we have done without a strong volunteer base."

The organization does its best to stay well connected to the world outside the membership. The organization has a hotline that is monitored by one of WAAGR's members.

"We get various calls on the hotline – from people asking about adoption, to a family that needs to surrender its Golden," said WAAGR Vice President Barbara Hart, of Menomonee Falls, Wis. "We answer and return calls as soon as possible."

Fundraising is key

In order to help all the Golden Retrievers it can, fundraising is a very important aspect of the group. Volunteers work year round to find ways to bring in donations to help the dogs. The organization holds four major fundraisers each year. The Perennial Sale, Really Big Rummage Sale, and Annual Golf Outing are held in the spring and summer months, while the Golden Holiday house is held the first Saturday in December.

"Fundraisers are important because most of our operating funds come from fundraising," Schmittinger said. "Adoption fees rarely cover the vet bills most dogs incur while in our care, so without our fundraising events, we wouldn't be able to help the Golden Retrievers we do."

WAAGR also relies on the Golden Retriever Foundation (GRF), which provides monies from the April Fund to help Golden Retrievers in the group's care. Established in February 1997, GRF is a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization created to fund projects that further the welfare of the breed. Visit <http://www.goldenretrieverfoundation.org/>.

Where do Golden Retrievers come from?

One question volunteers frequently are asked is where WAAGR's dogs come from. Owner surrenders, strays, and working with other rescues and shelters are just some of the ways that WAAGR finds out about Golden Retrievers in need. The rescue network is a close-knit one in many ways, as all groups are in it for the same reason: Helping animals. In fiscal year 2009 alone, WAAGR helped 165 dogs (the organization's fiscal year runs from July – June).

A perfect example of lending a hand came in fall of 2008. WAAGR received an email from another rescue about a 7-year-old Golden named Sampson in Michigan whose time was up in the shelter he was in. One of WAAGR's volunteers contacted the shelter to see what WAAGR could do. Three

days later, Sampson was on the car ferry from lower Michigan to Wisconsin, where two WAAGR volunteers met him. Multiple crew members on the ferry watched over Sampson and offered to adopt him if his home didn't work out!

"Within two hours of us hearing about him, we had plans in place for Sampson to come here," said WAAGR Intake Coordinator Karen Congdon, Eagle, Wis. "This guy was given a second chance. The great thing is that just a week earlier, we did a home visit for a family who was looking for a Golden that fit Sampson's description. He found his forever home right away."

"Rescue groups are important to me because I feel they fill a huge gap between the overcrowded animal shelters that can't keep dogs for any length of time and the wonderful families out there looking for a family companion," Schmittinger said.

The story of Gracie

A recent story that has touched the hearts of WAAGR members and the organization's fans on Facebook is that of Gracie. If dogs could talk, Gracie would have a very interesting story to tell. Gracie first came to WAAGR in Fall 2008, and has had quite the adventure since then. Hart told Gracie's story for her, and provided the following information.

Gracie spent her first three years of life in a puppy mill, never knowing any human kindness or freedom to enjoy life the way a Golden should. She and many other dogs were rescued when the Wisconsin Humane Society bought out Puppy Haven in western Wisconsin. WAAGR took the Golden retrievers to give them the start of their new lives, and Gracie was one of them. A short time after she came to WAAGR, Gracie escaped from her foster home in Eagle, Wis. Rescue members searched the surrounding areas and distributed flyers, hoping to track her down. Gracie was spotted a few times after her escape, but then disappeared.

In July 2010, WAAGR received a call on the hotline from the Water Safety Patrol in Williams Bay, which is located in southeastern Wisconsin. The man said they had a dog with a WAAGR tag on it. We got the number from the WAAGR tag and said we would track down the owners. In checking our records, we were shocked to find out the dog was Gracie.

Our volunteers went to pick up Gracie and when they arrived, she was hiding under a table in the building. The people who found her told us that someone had spotted her swimming in the middle of Lake Geneva, and called the Water Safety Patrol. The patrol team took a boat into the lake, and two people went into the water to get her into the boat. We will probably never know where she had been for almost two years, how she survived, or how she got more than 30 miles from where she was last seen.

Gracie is in foster care with WAAGR. We took her to the vet right away and found out she was not malnourished, which was a relief. Unfortunately, we also found out at the vet that she is heartworm positive, has Lyme disease, and anaplasmosis. The vet got her started on an antibiotic right away, and the heartworm treatment will follow.

Gracie has had a very long journey, but she's safe with WAAGR now. It's going to take some time, patience and love to help Gracie learn what it's like to live the Golden life. WAAGR is very happy to help Gracie on her journey.

"We are just amazed about Gracie's story," Cwiklowski said. "We are thankful she is back with the group and we are working hard to begin to build her trust with people, and to get her healthy."

Looking ahead

Each day brings many questions when it comes to rescue: What kind of donations will come in? Who will be adopted next? Will the next phone call be our next rescue? WAAGR looks forward to answering these kinds of questions each and every day. And with the volunteers, and support of the communities throughout the state, WAAGR continues to help find forever homes for deserving Golden Retrievers.

"We are so appreciative of the support we receive throughout the year, be it from forever homes looking to adopt, or Golden retriever lovers providing a kind donation," Cwiklowski said. "We look forward to what the next five years brings for the group."

WAAGR is always looking for volunteers to help with various areas of the group. Visit the organization on the Web at www.waagr.org or call the WAAGR hotline at (414) 517-7725 to find out how to get involved.