

“WHEN YOU WALK IN WITH A DOG IT’S LIKE EVERYBODY’S BODY LANGUAGE JUST CHANGES,” said film director Gail Gilbert of Evanston, Illinois. Remarkably, “everybody becomes more human.”

Gail Gilbert, who directed the documentary *Puppy Love*, available on demand on Amazon Prime Video, is referring to walking into a screening of her film with her 13-year-old Labrador Retriever Scout and witnessing the transformation of her audience. Gilbert has been touring various locations throughout the U.S. and plans to return to New England in the fall, promoting her film, in which



Gail Gilbert and Scout train at the AKC Museum.



Shooter and all the puppies received devoted care.

Puppy Love

A FILM OF HOPE AND RESILIENCE

BY KIM J. GIFFORD • PHOTOS PROVIDED BY GAIL GILBERT



Oliver (originally named White) and Shooter rest under cover.

Scout is one of the stars.

Not your typical dog story, *Puppy Love*, has been getting rave reviews from those who have watched the film, heralding it as a tale of hope, commitment, resiliency, and perseverance, all qualities that are so needed in today's chaotic and often fractured world. And while these characteristics describe the puppies in the film, they also apply to their owners, a core group of women, including Gail, who would not give up when the males in a litter of otherwise healthy puppies suddenly became paralyzed at approximately nine weeks.

Although an official cause was never determined, possible explanations include a reaction to their distemper/parvo vaccine or its carrier; a parasite in their mother's womb; or coonhound paralysis. It is likely that the two females in the litter were not affected because the immune system in male puppies develops at a slower rate than in females.

****SPOILER ALERT**** None of the puppies die in the movie although unfortunately some have since passed away from illness, cancer, and old age as they've reached their senior years, but the film remains a testament to these women dog owners and breeder who wanted these pups to recover. Film publicist Michael Smith said, "The bonding of the women in a common cause and the desire to see the Labs come back to their status as champion retrievers—this interplay of the women is the whole story!"

Jacki Davidoff of Evanston, Illinois, becomes emotional just talking about the film. "You can hear it in my voice, I find it so beautiful, and it makes me feel like any time I have my own doubts and vulnerabilities or insecurities that here's a story of complete transformation that was only possible because Gail and her



Gail and Scout pose by the Puppy Love table at the AKC Museum.



Shooter learned to walk again.



Penny and Shooter relate.

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friends decided ‘we’re not giving up,’” she said.

They definitely didn’t. When the Labrador puppies first became paralyzed, the vets recommended putting them down; the women, however, banded together in rehabilitating them. They created makeshift slings to help them walk and began giving them everything from Chinese supplements to chicken soup as well as eventually feeding them a raw food diet. Therapies included massage, acupuncture, and hydrotherapy. Within a matter of months, the dogs began regaining movement, first one, then another, and the next. The combination of keeping them active and nutritionally fed, no doubt, played a role in their recovery, but the one thing the movie shows is that love and perseverance had a huge role as well.

The women stars of the movie agree with the audience reaction but emphasize the dogs’ will to live as well. Michelle Cullen, White’s owner (or Oliver as he was eventually renamed) calls the documentary “a story of hope. I had tears in my eyes,” she said. “The boys in the litter were so stubborn in a way that nothing was going to get in their way of living complete Labrador lives. Oliver gave me strength and passion. Sometimes we are faced with challenges that we don’t think we can deal with, but these puppies really never stopped fighting.”

Not only did the puppies regain their ability to walk, but many went on to become champion tracking dogs. Oliver even became known as a “kitty tracker” as he was able to find people’s cats in the community where he lived.

A MOVE INTO FILMMAKING
Gilbert didn’t intend to make a movie when she began taking footage of the dogs. “I thought it was worthwhile



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Oliver wears a life jacket.

because I didn't know much about this world, and I thought maybe someone else might want to make a documentary. That's why we got camera people to come in," she said.

Then, when the dogs got better, she tucked everything in a box and went back to work. Gilbert had a successful career editing TV spots for national advertising campaigns but decided to transition into entertainment. She took a class on documentary film-making with an assignment to make a 10-minute documentary. Since she was short on time, she decided to use the footage that she already had of the dogs. "I just wanted to slam the thing together and get the assignment done, and so, it was a really bad documentary," she said.

Later, after graduating grad school and creating a sitcom pilot, she decided to turn her mediocre documentary into a more thought-out film. "Basically, I was just making a calling card for me as a filmmaker," she said, but it turned into much more than that. Gilbert began looking at the



Red stands with help.



Gail carries Oliver.

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Amanda and Red enjoy time together.



Shooter takes part in a rally.

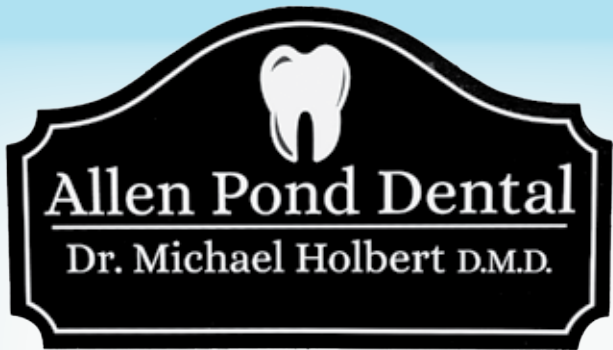
footage and finding things she didn't remember or hadn't been there for. From there, she mapped out a narrative with a message. Gilbert said she began to focus the narrative on "trying to beat the odds and by working together and digging deep inside yourself, you can move mountains."

As she began to show the film and offer Q & A sessions, she started to see the audience's reaction. "Everybody wanted to take selfies with the dogs. I didn't realize the audience would act like that. We had Shooter, Oliver, and Scout, unfortunately Red had just passed away from cancer."

Yet, the message of the film moved beyond the animals. "I had one

woman waiting for me after the Q & A who was bawling her eyes out telling me how it reminded her of when her mother died and all that they went through in hospice, and how nobody understood the pain that she was feeling. The doctors just kept saying let her go. I just couldn't let her go," she said. "It was really amazing. I didn't realize it would have that effect on people."

Although Mike Myers of Evanston, Illinois, credits the dogs as being the draw, he admits ultimately it is the women who are the stars. "I don't know if it's maternal instincts or what, but they have a capacity and an empathy to do amazing things ... one



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more vote for women who have that instinct, right? They made me cry, not just the dogs but these women, these dedicated, incredible, strong, smart women," he said.

Although Gilbert and Scout are planning a return trip to Vermont this fall, she is already at work writing her next screenplay about an American woman named Loie Fuller. The film takes place in Paris between 1890 and 1920, a period in which Fuller, an actress, was able to create dramatic stage performances using flowing fabrics, movement, and light. Her period of fame was short-lived but for a while “she was the most famous woman in the world,” said Gilbert.

She certainly remained in Gilbert's mind. When her sister was leaving for college, she gave Gilbert a poster of Fuller. Gilbert still has the poster. It had such an impact on her that she eventually ended up naming her own daughter Loie.

Gilbert said she feels huge gratification from making *Puppy Love*, and it has given her the confidence to make another movie. Liza Witt of Walpole, New Hampshire, calls *Puppy Love*, beautiful and easy to watch," she said.

Certainly, this story would not be widely known without Gilbert giving it voice.

“I wish more people could see beyond the dogs and understand the story,” said Meyers. “Then I wish we could live like that instead of being stupid, selfish, greedy ... all the things that dogs aren’t. That would be lovely.”

Gail Gilbert and Scout plan to visit area locations in Vermont in the fall. Be on the lookout for their schedule.

Kim J. Gifford is a writer, teacher, minister, and artist. She lives in Bethel, VT with her pugs Amore, Miss Maple and Coal and her shih tzu/schnauzer mix Lova and her cat Maisie.. To view her work, visit www.pugsandpics.com



Shooter jumps up to Penny



Scout kisses Gail outside the AKC Museum



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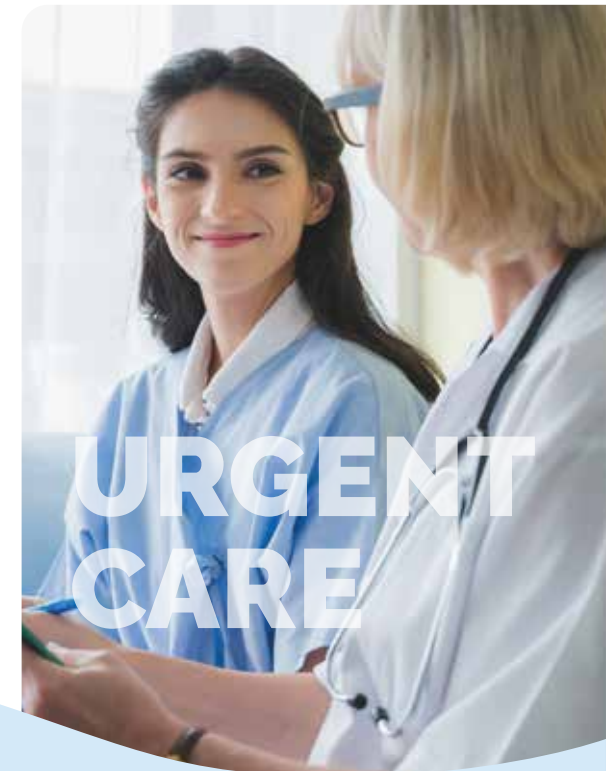
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