

The power of dogs

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When Evanston resident Gail Gilbert first got her yellow lab puppy, Scout, she never could have imagined what would happen.

Thirteen years ago, Gilbert's cousin, who lived in Marengo, reached out to Gilbert to see whether she wanted a puppy from her dog's litter. Gilbert said yes and picked up Scout at 8 weeks. Within a week, he wasn't able to walk well and soon couldn't put weight on any of his legs. Gilbert rushed him to the vet and then a neurologist. After running multiple tests, they couldn't diagnose the issue, except that Scout had become paralyzed. Gilbert was told she should put him down, but she was determined not to.

Gilbert called her cousin, who told her that Scout was the last one to become paralyzed. Out of the seven puppies in the litter, all five males became paralyzed, while the two females did not. The first paralyzed puppy, now living in Nebraska, had begun to show improvement a few weeks after seeing a holistic vet.

"It gave us hope," Gilbert said.

Along with her cousin and three other women who had paralyzed puppies, Gilbert saw a holistic vet who put Scout on a raw food diet and tried other holistic methods to improve his condition. After six months, all of the puppies became ambulatory.

Scout and his litter mate, Shooter, are still alive and healthy today.

"They are having a birthday party on January 28th," Gilbert said. "They have all had a great life."

A documentary subject

When the healing process was happening, Gilbert recorded footage of the puppies and the women's efforts as they worked with their dogs back on the farm in Marengo. "I wanted a record of it," Gilbert said.

Already a film editor, at 55 years of age Gilbert went to Northwestern University to get her MFA in screenwriting. "I had made a lot of short films and had a lot of luck with festivals, so I really wanted to make a feature film," she said.

For her Introduction to Documentary Filmmaking class, she was instructed to create a 10-minute film.

"I remembered that I had all of this footage of the dogs, and I shot an interview with the four women," Gilbert said.

After completing that, Gilbert knew she needed to make a movie, something she would own.

"I thought," Gilbert said, "the one movie I can make is my puppy movie. It was the thing that got me going."



COURTESY PHOTO

Scout visits Helping Paws in Woodstock. A portion of the proceeds from the showing of "Puppy Love" at Classic Cinemas in Woodstock on Feb. 10 will go to support the shelter.

From project to feature film

In 2020, Gilbert took the year to work on an outline. Next, she completed all of the editing and brought in some friends to assist with the music composition and provide feedback. She finished the film, "Puppy Love," at the end of November 2023.

"I have to say that in making the movie, I learned so much," she said. "It was such a release to get this story out there. People didn't really know what happened, and it was so painful. I had never looked at the footage, and it was a much more amazing story than I remembered."

"By pulling it all together, it was healing. It had a profound impact on me," she said.

After she met with a distributor, the film went to Amazon Prime. She had her first screening in February 2024 in Manhattan at the Museum of the Dog, with Scout in tow. Soon after, it was suggested she try theatrical screenings, with her first occurring in April 2024.

"The reaction was so amazing during the Q&A," she recalled. "People felt it was relatable, even if they weren't a dog person. One person had said, 'My mom went through an illness, and we pushed through and she got better.' It is such a powerful



thing to connect with an audience at that level," Gilbert said.

In a theater near you

"Puppy Love" will be shown at Classic Cinemas in Woodstock at 7 p.m. Feb. 10, with a Q&A to follow. Two additional screenings will be at the Carpentersville and Fox Lake Classic Cinemas locations, at 7 p.m. Feb. 11 and 12. Tickets can be purchased at the box office or on classiccineas.com. Scout will also be in attendance for those looking to meet the star!

"I just want to thank Classic Cinemas," Gilbert said. "They couldn't be more supportive. They seem very community-minded."

As is tradition with Gilbert's tour, a portion of the proceeds from ticket sales will be donated to a local animal shelter, this time Helping Paws in Woodstock. The shelter plans to allocate funds to its medical department expansion, a three-season room for visitors and adult cats, and a new large events room. Additionally, a trophy will be donated to Car-Dun-Al Dog Obedience Training Club in Huntley in honor of one of the puppies, Oliver, who is on the club's wall of champions and, unfortunately, passed away last summer from cancer.

Through everything, Gilbert reflected on the journey of the puppies and what she has learned in the process.

"I just think about how powerful dogs are," she said. "People change their whole persona when they see a dog; everyone is so happy. It's a powerful thing in intense situations. They bring happiness and calmness and self-confidence."

For more information on the work Gilbert is doing, visit her website, puppylovefilm.com, or her Instagram @puppylove_film.

Asked what she hopes people take away from the film, Gilbert said: "My intention is that people realize the power of not giving up. The human spirit is an amazing thing when you put your mind to something."