



No Pup Left Behind

She's helped over 200 lost dogs find their way home...and she's just getting started.

BY MOLLY MECHLER

As a lifelong animal lover, Melissa Melyan has always taken it to heart when a local pet goes missing. That feeling intensified in 2013, after she adopted her beloved boxer Sadie. Today, thanks to Melyan and her dedicated group of volunteers, missing pets from across the Jersey Shore have managed to find their way safely back home.

Melyan is the founder of Sadie's Lost Dog Search and Rescue, a strictly volunteer organization that has been helping families reunite with their missing pets since 2017. Her tireless efforts all began with one spontaneous gesture, about eight years.

"I saw a post for a lost dog and got a knot in my stomach," says Melyan. "I couldn't imagine the family's pain, and I wanted to do anything I could to help." Even though she didn't know them well, she called the family and offered to join their search. When their dog was safely returned, Melyan was there to witness the overwhelming joy of the owners, and she knew that she had found a new calling.

Over the next several years, Melyan would volunteer her efforts whenever similar posts appeared on social media. Sadie often joined her on these searches.

In 2022, Melyan began taking Sadie to obedience classes. After she'd mastered obedience skills, Sadie was invited to a search and rescue class, for the sake of assessing her potential. Once it was determined that she had the necessary aptitudes, Melyan began Sadie's scent training. "She was a natural. She picked up on commands and cues and learned to distinguish scents right away."

By 2022, Melyan and Sadie were using her new acquired scent training skills in the field. Together, they launched Sadie's Lost Dog Search and Rescue.



Opposite page, left: Melissa Melyan and Sadie. Right: Another tearful reunion. This page, clockwise from center: Sadie tracking a scent; Sadie assists with a rescue; Lady reunites with her family at approximately 3 a.m.; Volunteer Debra Altschiller and her dog Jackson; Melissa, Diane and Sadie, with the newly recovered Penny.

Growing The Team

In December 2022, Melyan expanded her team, first enlisting partner Dianne Vitale, and later Dianne's husband Mike Vitale. Soon, they were joined by dedicated volunteers Maria Santos and Debra Altschiller. Together, they've made it their mission to locate as many missing dogs as possible across Ocean and parts of Monmouth Counties.

The team follows a strict search and rescue protocol, working closely with family members to gather as much information as possible before determining a search area. Once on the job, the team doesn't stop looking until a pet is returned to their owner.

In many cases, careful traps are set. "We use 100% humane traps lined with burlap,

towels or clothing from the family," says Melyan. "To lure the animals in, we use the strongest-smelling foods, like hot dogs, bacon and chicken."

"My team and I have families, jobs and other responsibilities, but we make it our priority to find time to search for missing dogs," says Melyan. "Most often, we find ourselves out in the middle of the night, following leads and sightings. We do this out of love, not for any accolades or praise. The biggest reward is seeing the smiles on a family's face and knowing we played a part in bringing their pet home."

Tragically, Sadie fell ill and passed away in August 2023. The loss was heartbreaking, but Melyan continues her work in Sadie's honor. "She is still helping from above."



Left and bottom right: Casanova was a stray who was abandoned, until the Sadie's team helped recover him and find him a home. Top right: Melissa with Lady, a Pomeranian who was missing.

Paws and Effects

According to the American Humane Society, approximately 10 million pets go missing in the U.S. every year. Unfortunately, not all cases have a happy ending. Some animals are never found, while others are mistaken for strays and end up in shelters. Additionally, with the abundance of streams, lakes and ponds in Ocean and Monmouth Counties, missing dogs are often at risk of drowning. Melyan carries the weight of these cases with her every day. Even though some cases can be heartbreaking, she finds the strength to continue searching, knowing it could mean the difference between loss and reunion. To date, Sadie's Lost Dog Search and Rescue has successfully helped to recover over 200 missing dogs, a testament to the team's unwavering dedication and commitment. In some cases, results are quick. One of their

fastest recent trappings occurred in two days, when a dog returned home on its own, drawn to the smell of food and to its owner's familiar scent.

Other cases can take longer. One of their longest searches lasted eight weeks, when a Pomeranian named Lady escaped from a pet sitter's house and ran across three different towns. After eight harrowing weeks on the run, Lady was successfully trapped on a farm and returned to her family.

Melyan is grateful for the support of neighbors, friends and family. But to our readers, she can't stress this enough: Never chase a missing dog. Chasing or calling out can cause the dog to panic and run further, making the search even more difficult.

Instead, she advises people to remain calm, sit down, if possible, observe from a distance, note their location and report sightings

immediately.

In these cases, a good first step is creating and distributing flyers where the dog was last seen. Check with neighbors, especially those with Ring cameras or security footage. Clothing and foods with familiar scents should be placed outside the dog's home. Contact police departments and local shelters and spread the word with detailed social media posts.

Every case is different, but acting swiftly and strategically helps bring lost pets home. To learn more about their remarkable success stories, follow Sadie's Lost Dog Search and Rescue on Facebook. Their contact information is available online, if one of your furry friends ever goes missing.

Molly Mechler is a dedicated mother, seasoned educator, avid reader, recreational runner, thrifty shopper and local beach lover infused with a visionary mind for writing

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR PET GOES MISSING:

1. Stay calm and take immediate action.
2. Don't chase!
3. Leave out familiar scents: Place unwashed clothing, bedding, or food outside your home.
4. Alert your neighbors: Ask them to check their yards, garages, and security cameras.
5. Make flyers: Include a clear photo, contact info and the location last seen.
6. Post on social media: Share in the local community and lost pet groups.
7. Notify shelters and authorities: Call police departments, animal control, local vets and shelters.
8. Call an expert.
9. Microchipping your pet in advance is highly recommended. See our next feature for details!



Top: Sadie taking a break. Right: Cooper went missing in 2023, but was humanely trapped and rescued. Left: Cooper returns home.