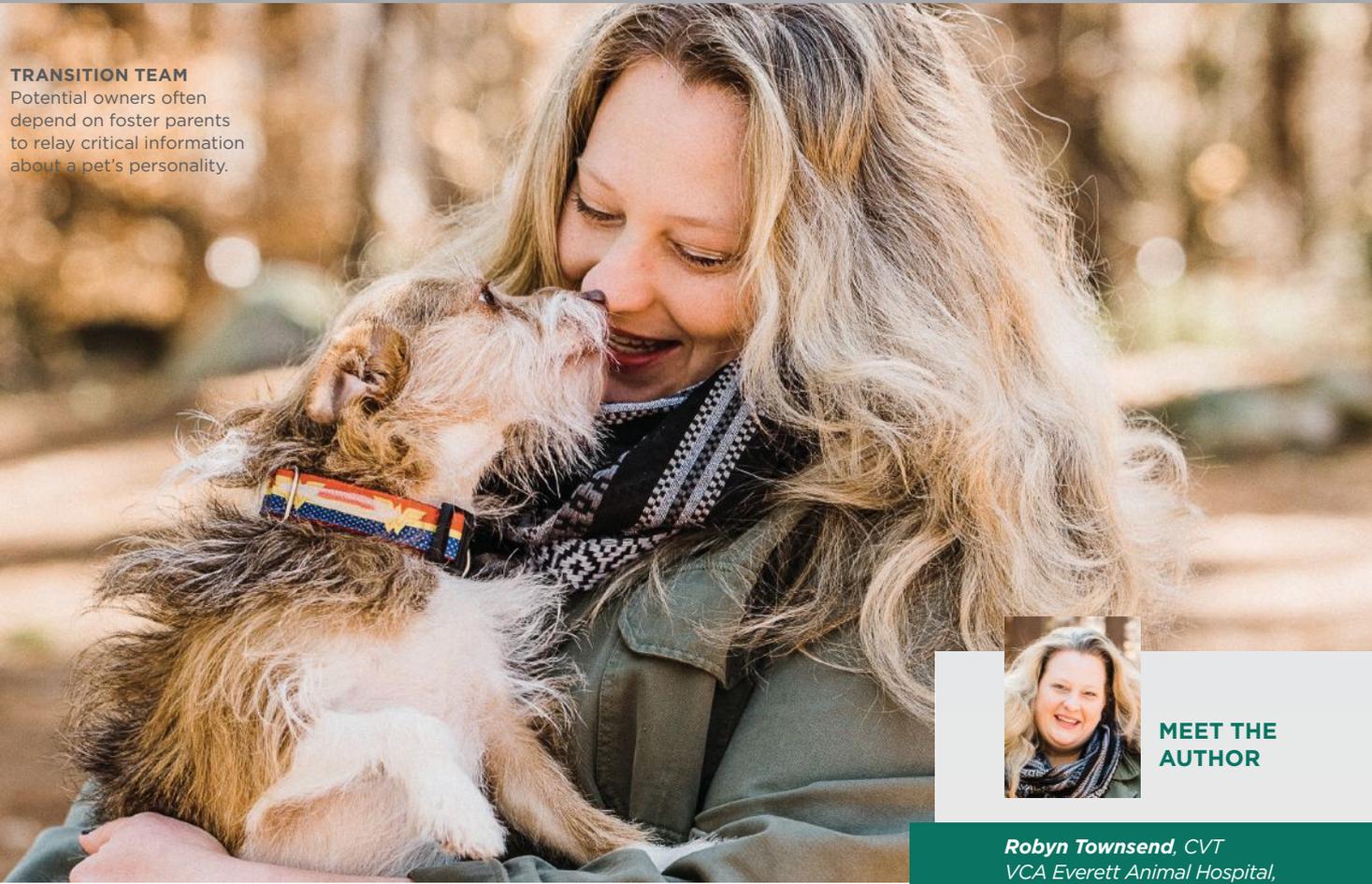




TRANSITION TEAM

Potential owners often depend on foster parents to relay critical information about a pet's personality.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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Fostering: An Open Home and an Open Heart

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, "What are you doing?" The youth replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die." "Son," the man said, "don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference!"

Robyn began her career as a kennel assistant at a local veterinary hospital in 1992. She became a certified veterinary technician in 2004. Her career has led her from working in a general practice to managing an ER/ICU in a large specialty hospital. She is currently managing a general practice in Everett, Massachusetts. She currently lives with her 3 dogs, Emme, Merry, and foster failure Bindi; 2 cats, Finn and Griffin; and lovebird, Luigi. Robyn continues to foster whatever animals come her way. Her latest foster was a house sparrow named Lucky.

Photo courtesy Eryn E Photography, LLC

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, “I made a difference for that one.”

This story by Loren Eiseley¹ is one that has become a part of me and defines why I chose a life of service in the veterinary field. As a certified veterinary technician for over 25 years, I cannot see myself doing anything differently. Many people tried to tell me “the pay is ridiculously low,” “the hours are incredibly long,” “it is a thankless job.” I did not care. I found my life’s calling.

The thank yous I received rarely came from an owner. They came from the animal that I was caring for. The appreciation was in their eyes.

My personal time is no different than my time at the hospital. I surround myself with a variety of adopted rescue pets ranging from cats and dogs to abandoned birds and rabbits.

Much like my start in veterinary medicine, I thought being a veterinarian was the only way I could get involved in the profession. I never knew there was such a thing as a veterinary technician. Similarly, I never thought I could do anything but adopt an animal. I never knew there were other roles I could play in a homeless pet’s journey.

A GLIMPSE INTO FOSTERING

I had never heard of fostering until an abandoned dog named Icon came into my life.

Icon was a young, exuberant pitbull who was on a 14-day hold at our hospital. I saw firsthand how this dog started developing “kennel rot.” Kennel rot is a non-technical term that is defined as a pet that starts to go stir crazy from being in a kennel for long periods of time without enough exercise. Because of his unknown rabies status, hospital staff could not take him on extended walks or runs outside of the hospital property. On my lunch hour, I would take him to our hospital’s 12×12 fenced-in yard and run him in circles or throw a ball for him.

I reached out to rescues that could potentially take him. Pitbulls, as you may know, have a reputation. The



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hysteria associated with this breed had already begun 10 years ago. I reached out to every pitbull and non-breed-specific rescue I could find. The non-breed-specific rescues said no because of his breed and the pitbull rescues were all full.

One of the pitbull rescues I spoke to said if we could find someone to foster Icon until a spot opened in their rescue, they would take him. I was so happy!

However, that feeling did not last long. Realistically, I was a technician that worked 10- to 12-hour days, up to 6 days a week. I had, at the time, 2 dogs that conformed to my long work days. Icon needed a home with a fenced yard or someone who could give him lots of exercise—not move from one cage to another. I was not the right foster for him.

I asked everyone I knew. No one could take him.

Before my eyes his behavior became worse and worse. One day at work he pulled one of the technicians down and she broke her finger. My good-natured boss and medical director knew how attached I was to Icon and said this was not fair to him. If we didn’t find the right fit, we needed to make a decision sooner rather than later regarding his future.

I prayed something or someone would come through. Nothing did.

The following week Icon was euthanized surrounded by love and licking his favorite peanut butter in his Kong toy.

I was heartbroken.

¹Eiseley L. The starfish story. In: *The Unexpected Universe*. New York, NY: Harcourt; 1969:67-92.



The first foster is always the hardest to say goodbye to. But when I get a Christmas card or a Facebook update from the families of the numerous animals I have fostered, it feeds my heart and soul.



Instead of going over in my mind what I could have done differently, I used Icon as a catalyst to become involved in fixing the problem.

BEING A BRIDGE

I did not have a lot of extra money, but what I did have was a house full of agreeable pets who acclimated to any situation or animal, lots of crates, and a spare bedroom. This is both a blessing and a curse because that gave me the green light to bring anything home. This is not a good combination for someone with a bleeding heart. Most veterinary professionals I know would take home at least 1 more animal than they should.

Fostering is a way to avoid keeping every animal I want to save.

The benefit of a foster-based rescue is that the pet has a safe place to prepare for their new life. Does the foster dog get along with cats? Other dogs? Kids? Do they have an issue with men in hats? Do they have manners? Are they crate trained? Are they a resource guarder? This information is invaluable when trying to match up a rescue pet with an unknown history to a new family.

These important questions can be answered during this animal's time in your home. A foster parent will get to know the pet day by day, peeling back their layers and discovering what their temperament and personality are.

Not counting the neighborhood animals I took care of as a kid, I have been fostering for over 10 years now. Many people, including colleagues, friends, and acquaintances, still commonly ask me, "How do you foster? I could never do that. I would never let the foster go!"

Truthfully, it is at times very hard to let them go—and sometimes very easy.

IF NOT YOU, WHO?

Fostering can be short- or long-term. There are kittens, puppies, adults, and seniors of every make and model that need someone. Do you have a certain breed that you love and understand? Are senior couch potatoes more your speed? If you can not have dogs or cats where you live, how about giving daily enrichment to small animals such as a hamster or a rabbit?

The internet is a wonderful thing. There are many resources available to anyone looking to find more information on how to begin the process of fostering a pet. Since volunteers with limited free time staff most rescues, narrowing down your questions is a huge help to them.

An example of a well-run foster-based rescue is Great Dog Rescue in Andover, Massachusetts. I have fostered for them for over 9 years. They have put together a great handout for first-time fosters (gdrne.com/fostering).

Another resource is Petfinder. Petfinder is an online database that works with over 11 000 animal rescues and shelters across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. They have compiled a few well-written articles with information, questions, and answers on fostering.

- petfinder.com/animal-shelters-and-rescues/fostering-dogs/what-is-dog-fostering
- petfinder.com/animal-shelters-and-rescues/fostering-dogs/fostering-a-pet-faq

I have met so many amazing people through fostering. I now have a network of rescue people that I am blessed to call friends. My life is all the richer for knowing these people who selflessly help these animals.

The first foster is always the hardest to say goodbye to. But when I get a Christmas card or a Facebook update from the families of the numerous animals I have fostered, it feeds my heart and soul. Like the little boy by the sea, this lets me know that I made a difference to that one. **TVN**