

Unconditional love and a chocolate Lab



Bailey, the chocolate Labrador, keeps watch over Courtney and, against the wall, her sister Sara.

Sometimes, rescues work both ways.

By Tim Hollenbach

Courtney had just turned 13 years old when she begged us to get a dog. She wanted a Labrador Retriever. Chocolate brown. Its name would be Bailey.

I wasn't thrilled by the prospect. We had just built a new home, and I had just started a new job. We had four kids younger than 15, my wife worked, too, and we didn't need another mouth to feed.

I resisted for as long as I could. For as long as any dad can resist his red-haired, Irish daughter. But when she wrote a two-page legal brief listing all the reasons we should get Bailey ("it will protect us") and promising to take total responsibility ("I will even pay for Bailey's food"), I gave up.

It happened fast. Literally within hours, while I was still at work, Courtney located a dog at the Belleville Area Humane Society. In fact, she told me over the phone in a voice filled with absolute joy, "Bailey's already at the house, and I bought her a collar, a toy, a dish and some food." The best part, Courtney said, "is that Bailey won't cost anything. They gave her to us. For free!"

There is no such thing as a free dog. Bailey, it turned out, had many problems, an exam by a local vet had revealed all too clearly. She had heart worm, breast tumors and kennel cough, and she was dehydrated. When I spoke to the vet on the phone, he was completely honest: It would cost several thousand dollars to bring Bailey back to health, and even then her chances of survival were slight.

Courtney and my wife were on the

floor in our new kitchen with Bailey when I arrived home and shared what the vet had told me. Three sets of sad eyes later, I caved for the second time in less than a day and took Bailey back to the vet.

Against the odds, she survived her surgeries, and Courtney had her chocolate Lab.

That was nine years ago. Courtney is 21, finishing up nursing school and living away from home. My older daughter, Sara, who was 15 when Bailey arrived, is married and living with her husband in Georgia. My two sons, Eric and Tommy, 8 and 6 then, are now teen-agers in high school, living in teen-age world. Where did the time go?

During these years, my wife and I wondered how we would possibly get our children through adolescence. How would we shield them from Columbine, "South Park," gangsta rap, crystal-meth and Internet porn and still give them the freedom they needed to grow? How could we give them direction and be stern when necessary, but never let them doubt that ours was an unconditional love?

Part of the answer was Bailey, the chocolate Labrador we didn't need.

Bailey was there for our kids, every day, always happy to see them. Bailey never came home late from work. She was never in a bad mood. She was never in a hurry. She never sulked or yelled. She was never disappointed in their performance at anything.

Bailey didn't care if they'd had missed the bus or had broken-up with a boyfriend. Bailey didn't care if the other

kids had made fun of their hair or if their acne'd flared up. She didn't care whether they had dates to the prom, failed an important test, fought with their best friend or were cut from the team. Bailey didn't care about report cards at all.

Bailey just loved them. No matter what. All she wanted in return was to sit in the sun and get scratched behind the ears from time to time. She was both the source and the example of unconditional love that teenagers need desperately.

The years weren't easy on Bailey. She had survived surgery but still suffered from seizures and a thyroid condition. At one point, she had to have a toe amputated. Near the end, she had trouble walking, couldn't see and and lost her hearing, but never — never — her capacity to love.

Bailey died in her sleep the other day. I cried, of course. Not only because I'll miss her, but also because the time she spent with us passed quickly. Our children grew up in that time — under the gentle gaze of a chocolate Labrador who offered love to all and only wanted to sit in the sun.

The other day, Tommy, our 15-year-old, asked me when we were going to get another dog. "We just don't have time for a dog right now," I told him. "Mom's working more, I'm too busy and you just have too many other commitments to school and sports."

Of course, that's pretty much what I said nine years ago.

Tim Hollenbach of O'Fallon, Ill., is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to the Commentary Page.