

Rescued Mexican street dog digs new adopted life

DNA My Dog gives Toronto volunteer insight into mystery mutt's background

VALERIE HAUCH
STAFF REPORTER

Coco may have started off as a skinny "mystery mutt," one of scores of mixed-breed dogs that forage at Puerto Vallarta's garbage dump and on the streets of the Mexican resort city. But to say she's ended up one "lucky dog" is an understatement.

She was picked up by animal rescuers who brought her to the SPCA shelter, which is run by volunteers, both local and international.

One of those volunteers is Toronto retiree Margo McLeod, who with her husband, Rob, spends several months a year in the city. In addition to volunteering at the shelter, McLeod fostered a couple of dogs while they waited for homes.

She'd finally decided last December she was ready to adopt a dog and went to the local SPCA, visiting the animals when they were in open areas where they can walk around.

Some would come up, nose around and then run off and play. But when she sat on the floor in one area, a trim, medium-sized dog came up to her, sniffed, and stayed.

"Coco chose me ... she would not leave my side. She put her paws on my leg, and that was it. She was

looking at me and it was as if she was saying, 'Let's go home,'" said McLeod.

That's what they did, after McLeod signed the necessary paperwork.

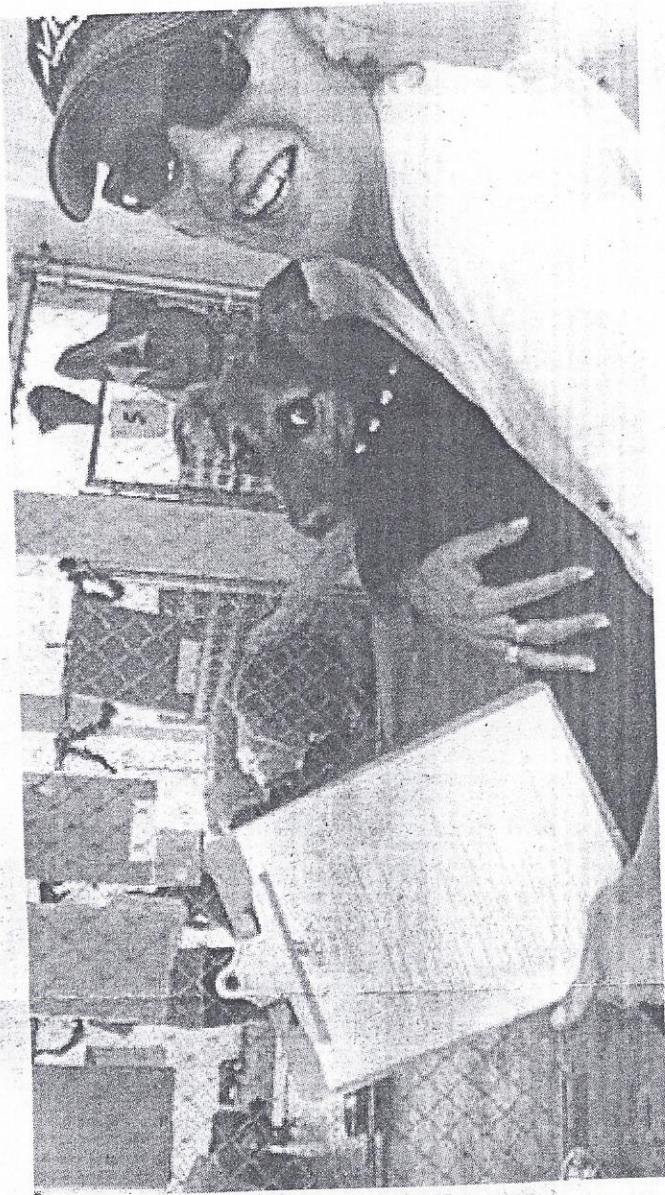
Although she was malnourished when picked up and brought to the shelter, Coco was good with people and it was apparent from her behaviour that she'd had a home at some point.

They later flew to Toronto in spring and with a veterinarian's health certificate in hand, indicating that the dog had all her vaccinations, the McLeods paid a \$30 fee to get her through Canadian customs.

Back in Toronto, McLeod and her husband decided it would be good to know what breeds make up their dog who is very attentive and intelligent, with a sweet disposition and a lot of loyalty. Coco, whose teeth indicate she's about one year, three months old, isn't noisy but will give a sharp warning bark in some instances.

McLeod had heard about a Toronto company called DNA My Dog, which will analyze the DNA taken from a mouth swab and give a printout of the breeds and their characteristics and traits as well as health risks.

After Coco's inside cheek was swabbed, it turns out she has large parts of beagle and Italian greyhound (between 20 to 36 per cent of each) and smaller parts of English setter and German shepherd (10 to



Torontonian Margo McLeod holds Coco and the dog's adoption certificate at Puerto Vallarta's SPCA in Mexico.

20 per cent). DNA My Dog has been offering the test for about five years and does tens of thousands per year in North America, and about 3,000 to 4,000 annually in Toronto alone, says company president Mindy Tenenbaum. It also has many clients from around the world who get in touch through the website.

The entire process costs about \$60 in Ontario, plus extra for shipping and tax.

"People are just curious and they want to know" what breeds are in their dog, she says.

"Sometimes, people are adopting a puppy and they want to know what they're getting into, what to expect." With Coco, McLeod says she wouldn't have suspected that she has English Setter in her background. The dog's shape suggests Italian Greyhound, as do that breed's traits of gentleness, affection and attach-

ment to their masters, so that didn't surprise her.

Coco has a ton of energy (common to beagles) and goes for several walks a day, including trips to a local off-leash dog park where her favourite chase buddy is a dog named Hank. That offsets another trait — a particular fondness for food.

"She's a street dog all right — she eats every meal like it's her last," says McLeod.