

FEATURE

Great Strides for a Great Breed: Foundation Devotes Resources to Health and Welfare of Australian Shepherds Across the Nation

by Pamela H. Sacks, Guest Editor

It was the culmination of a year of high hopes and hard work. The United States Australian Shepherd Foundation was about to announce the winner of the Paula Waterman Bronze Australian Shepherd.

The sculpture had created quite a stir among members of the United States Australian Shepherd Association, which formed the Foundation in 2005. A year-long sale of raffle tickets had brought in \$9,000 to benefit the Foundation's Cancer Challenge Fund.

Anticipation mounted as Foundation President Robin Prouty called Waterman to the front of the room at the USASA's annual banquet, which was held in May during the National Specialty at Purina Farms in St. Louis.

Waterman, who was delighted to do the honors, plunged her hand into the bowl and came up with a ticket. Some confusion ensued over the winner's name.

"I think they're trying to say my name," Brenda Bowlby recalled telling family members sitting nearby. "I think I won!"

Indeed she had.

That moment was as special for the Foundation's Board of Trustees as it was for Bowlby. The Foundation, commonly referred to as the USASF, is the charitable arm of the USASA, providing financial support for health and genetics research, rescue assistance, junior showmanship scholarships and breed education through tax-deductible contributions.

"I'm especially pleased with the success of the sculpture raffle, because in a tough economic year, Australian Shepherd fanciers rose to the challenge and supported a truly breed-specific cause of great value," Prouty said.

While Bowlby was glad that the raffle had raised money for a good cause, she readily acknowledged that she had a more personal reason to be excited about the outcome.

She had traveled to the show by train from her home in Boulder, Colorado, with her cousin and her uncle and aunt, Bob and Nadine Grady. The family trip was a reunion of sorts, as well as a birthday celebration.

As a child, Bowlby had great fun attending dog shows in California's Sacramento Valley, where she grew up and where

the Gradys still live. For Nadine Grady, this year's National was a time of celebration: She was turning 70 and was honored to be judging Best of Breed.

Grady had talked about her hopes of winning the Waterman sculpture, and, after viewing it, Bowlby and her cousin each bought two tickets. When Bowlby's name was announced, she knew she would give the sculpture to her aunt as a birthday gift and a token of thanks for the wonderful childhood memories.

"My aunt is the neatest lady ever," Bowlby declared. "She and my uncle have five Aussies. This is their passion. When I took the microphone I knew I wouldn't let this moment pass without honoring her."

Waterman's generosity in waiving her fee to design the sculpture and Bowlby's gift to her aunt were fitting gestures in light of the Foundation's mission, which is to support the breed club and Australian Shepherds in general. Although the Foundation is an arm of the USASA, it is a separate and distinct entity that operates under a strict set of guidelines governing nonprofit organizations.

The Foundation's vice president, Leon Goetz, explained how the USASF came to be formed. In the first years of the millennium, when the breed club was in its infancy, club officers such as Goetz, who served as secretary, were finding their way in creating an organization that would benefit the Australian Shepherd and work effectively with the American Kennel Club. Goetz consulted with a good friend serving as Secretary of the Golden Retriever Club of America, who urged him to consider forming a foundation to serve as a vehicle for contributions that would support a variety of charitable endeavors.

"USASA was not classified as a tax-exempt organization, and I felt we were being penalized in terms of donations from members of the fancy," Goetz said. "My friend explained to me how their foundation worked, and it seemed to me the



Scholarship recipient Kate Eldredge with her Pembroke Welsh Corgi Flash and her Aussie Tia.

perfect fundraising vehicle that could benefit our Aussies and our programs.”

Goetz brought the idea to the USASA's Board of Directors. A committee was appointed to conduct research and make recommendations. Led by committee member Libby Graham, the Foundation was established.

“While I do not want to discount other charities benefiting the Aussie, it is important that USASA members realize the USASF is their Foundation and is in existence to benefit the health and welfare of our dogs by underwriting research, rescue/disaster relief and educational programs for the USASA,” Goetz said.

Goetz pointed out that the Foundation, now in its fourth year, has made great strides. In January 2008, the Foundation's Roger McKay Memorial Health and Genetics Fund, in collaboration with the USASA's Health and Genetics Committee, granted \$5,000 to a two-year study of the genetic causes of epilepsy under way at the University of Minnesota. It also awarded its first \$1,000 Junior Showmanship Scholarship, which went to Maria Neff.

In the spring of 2009, the second Junior Showmanship Scholarship went to Kate Eldredge, a top junior handler who competes in agility, herding, rally, obedience, tracking and junior showmanship. Eldredge, who is 18 and from Vernon, New York, is well known to readers of this publication as its rally editor. She is an award-winning writer who will enter Cornell University in the fall with the intent of majoring in English and the goal of becoming a novelist, according to Karen Godwin, USASF's secretary.

All of the money raised through the Waterman sculpture raffle will go to a cancer research project. Australian Shepherds appear to be suffering in increasing numbers from cancer, most notably hemangiosarcoma and lymphoma. “Proper diagnosis is sometimes difficult, and effective treatments are often lacking,” Paula McDermid, a member of the Health and

Genetics Committee, wrote in the September 2008 issue of USASA News.

In an interview, McDermid said that the Health and Genetics Committee is considering several different cancer research projects for financial support. While no decision has yet been made, one study of particular interest is being conducted by Dr. Matthew Breen and Dr. John Cullen at the College of Veterinary Medicine at North Carolina State University. The study, which has been funded by the AKC Canine Health Foundation, is focused on soft-tissue sarcoma, hemangiosarcoma, lymphoma and histiocytic malignancy, according to McDermid. Drs. Breen and Cullen work directly with samples provided by owners whose Australian Shepherds have suffered from cancer.

The Health and Genetics Committee will consult with the AKC Canine Health Foundation in reaching a decision on which project to recommend to the USASF. McDermid explained that the AKC Canine Health Foundation “is the body that has the scientific and technical expertise to review and monitor the studies.

“We rely on them to say, ‘Yes, this is a valid study, and the credentials of the researcher are good, and the project is worthwhile,’” she said.

The Health and Genetics Committee expects to reach a decision and make a recommendation to the Foundation by the end of the summer, McDermid said.

Along with research grants and scholarship awards, the Foundation's board is committed to providing financial support for breeders' and judges' educational programs offered at the annual National Specialty, Prouty said

Prouty went on to emphasize the importance of the fourth aspect of the Foundation's mission: financial assistance for rescue work through the Joseph Hartnagle Memorial Rescue Fund.

“Each year, hundreds of Aussies are abandoned, abused, left in pounds, or turned in by owners directly to local rescue programs across the country,” Prouty said. “Local rescues work very hard at the grassroots level. The value of our fund cannot be exaggerated when a local rescue needs money because of an emergency that financially burdens its program.”

Both Goetz and Prouty were delighted with the success of the raffle and the USASF's Hospitality Wine and Cheese social during National Specialty week, which proved both popular and educational in spreading the word about the Foundation.

New fundraising plans are afoot, they said. Meanwhile, they urge Australian Shepherd enthusiasts to go the Foundation's website, www.usasfoundation.org, and donate to the general fund or to one of the funds dedicated to a specific effort. Prouty suggested that one way to make a donation really matter is to contribute in memory of a beloved Australian Shepherd—your own or a friend's.

Goetz summed up his thoughts as follows: “The USASF cannot grow and flourish and fund research without the help of USASA members and Australian Shepherd fanciers in general. We need your support.”

Pamela Sacks is a freelance writer from Worcester, Massachusetts. She was a contributing editor to Animals magazine, has twice been awarded the top prize in feature writing by the Dog Writers Association of America, and was named Media Person of the Year by the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1999. She and her husband, Jim, are the proud owners of an Australian Shepherd, Zorro, and a Parson Russell Terrier, Munch.