

Phoenix Animal Rescue

JUNE 2013 WINNER - 965 VOTES

The dogs arrive broken. They are abandoned, neglected and oftentimes sick.

To make matters worse, many are pit bulls that must work against stereotypes to find new homes. But with the help of foster families and volunteers, Phoenix Animal Rescue works to make their lives whole again.

Phoenix Animal Rescue has won June's SunState Federal Credit Union's Charity of the Month contest with 965 votes on Facebook. The organization was nominated by Kim Lake.



June's winners receiving their \$1,000 prize.

The Gainesville-based rescue was founded in 2003 by Michelle Dunlap. After adopting her own dog, Chance, in 1999, Dunlap left her job teaching and began working with animal rescues instead. During this time, an unlikely relationship with a pit bull would impact her life forever.

The dog's name was Phoenix. She had been stolen from her owner's backyard and forced into dog fighting. When the original owner finally tracked down Phoenix, Dunlap helped to rehabilitate what had become an anxious, withdrawn and traumatized dog.

In 18 months, Phoenix grew. She not only recovered — she thrived.

Phoenix went from being an abused and unsocial dog to receiving the AKC Canine Good Citizens Award. Phoenix's dramatic turnaround was symbolic of the positive effects that can come from the dedicated and compassionate work of animal rescuers. Phoenix became the rescue's namesake, and to this day, the rescue works in memory of her story.

Since its founding, the rescue has helped thousands of dogs find homes. This year alone, more than 150 dogs have already been adopted. Although the rescue does not have its own facility, a close-knit group of 40 or so foster homes offer space until adoption.

"We support each other and spend time with one another even outside of rescue," Dunlap said.

Although the rescue receives dogs from a variety of places, it has become closely linked to Levy County Animal Services. In a single year, they were able to reduce the euthanasia rate at the shelter by 70 percent, Dunlap said. At the same time, their own adoption rate went up by 126 percent.

The rescue has also increased its exposure by participating in the Gainesville PetSmart adoption days on Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Many of the dogs that come to the facility on adoption days are pit bulls, and the events help visitors see the truth about the breed that Dunlap believes to be highly misunderstood.

As for future plans, Dunlap is putting the prize money toward buying a larger piece of property in Levy County.

"It'll be a farm where people can come and visit with our dogs, not to adopt but to volunteer," Dunlap said. "It will be where dogs can go to heal, recover and retire." ■

Learn more at www.facebook.com/phoenixanimalrescue.

TO NOMINATE A CHARITY OF YOUR CHOICE OR TO VOTE FOR YOUR FAVORITE NOMINEES, VISIT:

www.facebook.com/SunStateFCU

and click on "Charity of the Month".

