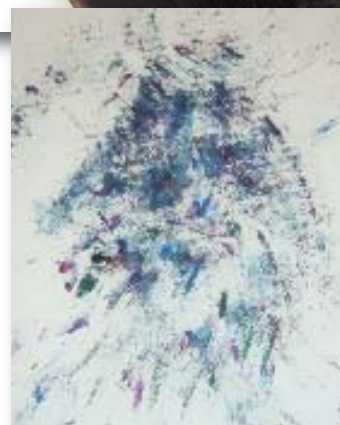


Tail of compassion

By Joe Montgomery

Marvelous Marvin leads Dr. Finocchio to new ventures



Dr. Ernest Finocchio applies paint to Marvin's tail. Above is a finished painting called 'Equus,' which sold for \$750.

One look in the eyes changed everything. In the matter of a moment, a brush with death would transform two lives — that of a retired equine doctor and a black Labrador retriever who struggled with a permanent disability.

In his new role as a shelter administrator, Dr. Ernest J. Finocchio, K-State DVM class of 1968, was out of his comfort zone. He had grown up around race horses with his father, who was a trainer. But after having retired from a 37-year equine practice and working with Thoroughbreds, Dr. Finocchio was now in a world of cats

and dogs in need of loving homes. This was the nature of his duties with the Rhode Island Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RISPCA).

"I basically had no knowledge of cats and dogs, but it has worked out fine for the past seven years," Dr. Finocchio said. His limited veterinary responsibilities included things like vaccinations, deworming, suturing cuts, but no internal medicine, which is left to outside veterinarians. "My main job is running the day-to-day operations of the shelter and participating in cruelty investigations, many involving horses. As far as practicing equine medicine, I

do very little today, mainly taking care of horses I delivered as foals that are now in their third decade of life."

Rescuing Marvin

One of his daily routines was to observe every animal in the shelter on a daily basis. While this was a routine event, Dr. Finocchio has strong memories of one particular day.

"It was the middle of October 2002," he said. "I was making my rounds, and one of the dogs always anticipated my arrival. He would wait at the front of his kennel and ever so gently take the biscuit out of my hand. On that morning, I made eye contact with

Marvin — it's difficult to explain, but there was a feeling like something was meant to be."

Marvin had been in the shelter a long time and had built up a 'rap sheet.' He had been given up twice already because of difficulties with his care. Marvin was unable to put down his right hind leg. His first family kept him until he was 3, but then had to give him up. Marvin was adopted for a short time after that, but was quickly returned to the shelter.

"They have what they call 'black dog syndrome' in shelters," Dr. Finocchio explained. "Black dogs and cats are the last to be adopted. I certainly didn't see myself adopting a 90-pound Labrador retriever with a disability."

But fate proved otherwise. Marvin had been scheduled to be put down because of his extended stay at the shelter and the fact that no one was looking for a two-time loser. There was little to no interest in Marvin by visitors to the shelter.

"The difficult decision to put Marvin to rest loomed heavy with me on that day I will forever remember," Dr. Finocchio said. "Our veterinary technician had just shaved Marvin's leg, and I had the sodium pentobarbital injection ready to go, but we exchanged that special look like we had before, and I put the syringe down and decided to give Marvin a second chance. I brought Marvin home that Thanksgiving. We had 16 people over at the house for Thanksgiving dinner, and Marvin fit right in as if he had been with us all his life. Since then he has become a permanent part of our family."

An artful tail

At this point, all lived happily ever after — except there's more to this story.



Dr. Finocchio and Marvin visit special needs volunteers from Horace Mann Educational Associates.

"I had read a story in National Geographic magazine about these elephants in India that they taught to paint," Dr. Finocchio said. "They were selling these paintings for a lot of money, so I thought it might be interesting to see what would happen if I tried something similar with Marvin."

Dr. Finocchio came up with his own technique for Marvin.

"Marvin likes to wag his tail a lot, so I put paper on the floor and some paint on Marvin's tail," Dr. Finocchio said. "Before my very eyes, he was wagging his tail back and forth and up and down, and I was astonished by what appeared on the canvas, but more so than my wife and son who weren't convinced that the painting would sell."

The paintings did sell — and for good money — one for \$2,500. Over time, Marvin's paintings became a popular fundraiser for the RISPCA. Marvin also wrote a book about his life titled "Marvelous Marvin" with the help of Dr. Finocchio. Over the last seven years, more than \$110,000 has been raised from Marvelous Marvin's artwork and book.

A talent for therapy

Dr. Finocchio discovered another way to take advantage of Marvin's friendly disposition. He explained, "After I adopted Marvin, I took him to work with me every day. One day I was talking to a dog trainer, and she asked if I'd ever thought of doing pet therapy work with Marvin as a pet partner. If you passed tests with the Delta Society [editor's note: a national nonprofit organization that certifies service and therapy animals], they allow you to visit schools, hospitals and homes for the elderly. Well, I never trained Marvin a day in my life, but I took him to the testing in March 2003. Out of 14

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Marvin with his family, Dr. Finocchio, his wife, Marie, and their son, Tim.

other dogs, Marvin scored the highest."

Delta Society Pet Therapy dogs are tested every two years. When Marvin took his second test in 2005, he was one of four dogs in New England who had a perfect score.

Since then, Dr. Finocchio and Marvin have visited 108 different facilities, including nursing homes, hospitals, day care

centers, libraries and even summer camps. Earlier this year, Dr. Finocchio and Marvin were named the national therapy Pet Partner team of the year by the Delta Society.

Cancer sidelines Marvin

In late March 2009, Marvin was diagnosed and treated for a cancerous abdominal tumor. The discovery of his cancer was purely by chance.

"We have our fingers crossed," Dr. Finocchio said. "The surgeons removed Marvin's spleen and a tennis-ball-sized tumor. Marvin is doing as well as can be expected under the circumstances. His cancer was an incidental finding, because he was sick from something else at the time we saw Marvin's veterinarian."

As of this writing, Marvin continues to improve. Dr. Finocchio said that one of the highlights of their pet therapy work was with children who have cancer at the Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, R.I. He hopes Marvin can return to the hospital so they can continue to instill hope in children with cancer and to never give up. Marvin has always been an inspiration to those down on their luck, and he looks forward to many more years of serving his community. 🌱

Learn more about Marvin at his site: www.marvinfund.org The Marvin Fund has helped more than 1,500 elderly and disabled people keep their pets who otherwise would have been put to rest when an owner can't pay medical expenses. Marvin also assists animals dropped off at the RISPCA shelter who are adoptable, but have medical problems.