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MYAJC EXCLUSIVE: PERSONAL JOURNEYS

Warrior puppy

Starved and abandoned as a puppy, Xena cheats death to change lives.

Posted: 4:00 a.m. Friday, Sept. 19, 2014

By [Shane Harrison](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution



Linda Hickey hugs Xena the Warrior Puppy at their home in Johns Creek on Friday, August 29, 2014. Above them is a portrait of Xena by the artist Dean Russo. HYOSUB SHIN / HSHIN@AJC.COM

Her origin is a mystery.

She appeared one September day on a lawn near Decatur, a skeletal creature barely clinging to life and unable to move.

Related Gallery



Photos: Xena the Warrior Puppy and her family

She can't tell us what she went through. She can't talk. But it was bad.

She was so emaciated, dehydrated and malnourished, it was impossible to determine her breed.

But she wasn't ready to go. She had a mission, though no one knew at the time how many lives she would touch. The only remnant of her suffering is the scar above her nose. It's her badge of honor.



Xena spends a lot of time in Jonny's lap while they're riding in the car.

Today she is a mighty princess with a Facebook page that measures more than 50,000 followers.

She is Xena the Warrior Puppy.

Related Video



[Xena the Warrior Puppy](#)

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At death's door

Christine (Chrissy) Kaczynski got the call on a Saturday, two years ago.

A co-founder of Friends of DeKalb Animals rescue organization, Chrissy was used to these calls. A resident had found a stray motionless on their front lawn. The dog was in bad shape.

When Chrissy got to DeKalb County Animal Services, it looked like it might be hopeless. She'd never seen one this bad.

"She was cold. She was almost dead when she arrived," Chrissy says.

At the shelter, they warmed some towels and wrapped them around her stiff, thin body to raise her temperature. They gave her intravenous fluids and applied a nutritional supplement to her gums.

There was no veterinarian on duty on the weekend, so Chrissy called her own vet, Dr. Carol Tobias, who agreed to meet her at the LaVista Animal Hospital in Decatur.

To Chrissy's amazement, the fawn colored pup was sitting up and looking around by the time they got to the vet's office.

She continued to rally as they put her on the scale and she tried to walk off it, still wobbly, but she was trying. She weighed less than 6 pounds. They gave her a little food, which she enthusiastically ate. They estimated she was about four months old.

Dr. Tobias determined that there was no need to hospitalize her. She just needed food and care, so she went home with Chrissy.

Chrissy named her Xena, after TV's warrior princess. She wanted the dog to have a strong name. She'd need it for the battle ahead.

She remained at home with Chrissy for several months, growing bigger and stronger until she was ready for her forever home. Her personality emerged, a sweet and playful pup who loved attention. She adored playing with plastic squeaky toys, and her Facebook fans made sure she had a box full of them.

Despite numerous news reports, including one in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, including offers of rewards, Xena's neglectful original owners were never found.

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Meeting her family

Linda Hickey wasn't looking for another dog. She already had two, Sally, a Lab mix, and Petunia, a dachshund.

Then she saw Xena.

"I was straightening up my family room. The TV's on, but I'm not paying attention," she remembers. "As soon as I saw that photo, the one on the vet table, I sat down and started to pay attention. I grabbed my laptop and typed her name in and clicked 'like' and started following her."

Linda ended up falling in love with Xena on Facebook, and she wasn't alone. By the end of September, Xena's Facebook page had more than 10,000 followers.

In November 2012, Friends of DeKalb Animals announced a fundraiser for Xena. She wasn't healthy enough to be adopted, but she was healthy enough to meet her fans.

Linda told her husband, Grant, that she wanted to go.

Do you really think you're going to get this dog? he asked.

Yes, she replied. She was sure.

There were complications, though.

In the early days of her Facebook page, Xena was identified as a Labrador mix. But as she blossomed, she revealed the physical characteristics of an American Staffordshire Terrier. In other words, she was a pit bull mix.

“I had fallen in love with a Lab,” Linda says. “When I heard she was a pit, I had so much inner turmoil.”

Pit bulls are not a breed but a category of dog. Often trained as guard dogs and prized among organizers of illegal dog fights, pit bulls have become maligned by some as inherently aggressive. They’ve even been banned or restricted in some communities. But fans of pit bulls say they are loyal and well behaved when trained properly. They suggest the problem is at the other end of the leash when behavioral problems arise. “Punish the deed, not the breed,” is a popular slogan among supporters of pits.

“I had to really dig deep and say, ‘Can I still love this pit that I thought was a Lab?’” Linda says. “My mother’s like, ‘You’re not going to have a pit bull.’ We all had the same opinion of them because we weren’t informed, we were not educated.”

Linda decided to go to the fundraiser anyway, and she planned to take her 7-year-old son, Jonny.

Held at Savage Pizza in Avondale Estates, the event was the first opportunity for Xena to meet her fans – and it was a celebration. Xena was the star, soaking up the attention and dashing around the patio. She played tug-of-war with the kids, chased balls and stole a piece of everyone’s heart.

Eager to see what a pit bull looked like up close, Linda discovered was a playful, energetic puppy with no fur wearing a little pink and blue sweater.

She’s a dog, she’s just a regular dog, Linda thought.

“If she was supposed to be vicious and aggressive, she didn’t get the memo,” Linda says.

Linda and Jonny only stayed for a few minutes, but a film crew happened to catch a moment between Jonny and Xena.

Once Linda saw them on the news that night, “I couldn’t download those adoption papers fast enough,” she says.

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Xena goes home

Many of Xena's Facebook fans had expressed interest in adopting her, but Friends of DeKalb Animals didn't want to take applications until the warrior was healthy enough.

Five months after her rescue, a robust and rambunctious Xena was ready to find her own family.

Chrissy was looking for someone who wouldn't let Xena's past define her, someone who would put the time and effort into training. She wanted a family that understood they were getting a puppy, not a fragile and abused animal. She found that in Linda's extensive application.

On Feb. 11, 2013, Chrissy took her for a trial overnight visit to the Hickey home in Johns Creek.

Warm and welcoming, the four-bedroom home sits on a cul-de-sac just north of the Chattahoochee River. Even without the chorus of canines, you'd know this was the home of dog lovers from the photos and memorabilia that fill the entryway and front room.

Originally from New Jersey, the Hickeys moved to metro Atlanta about 15 years ago to escape the harsh winters. Besides Jonny, Linda, a part-time preschool teacher, and husband Grant, who works for the city of Johns Creek, have a 17-year-old son, Christian.

When Xena first arrived, she made herself at home. She joined in with Sally and Petunia, running around the house, jumping on the couch and just being a typical dog.

Later that day, Linda prepared to pick Jonny up from school. She was nervous. This was a new experience and she didn't know what to expect, but she put Xena in the minivan and drove off to Medlock Bridge Elementary.

When Jonny got into the back seat, there was Xena, and she was immediately smitten with this new human, climbing in his lap as if claiming him as her own.

That might not seem remarkable except for one thing.

"Jonny has autism," Linda says. "He doesn't accept all that on his lap, in his space. He likes his bubble."

Linda knew something was different about Jonny soon after he was born. He wouldn't eat. He wouldn't crawl. He wouldn't talk. The Hickeys have spent many years and dollars on therapy for Jonny, trying to pull words from him.

But in the backseat of Linda's van that day, Jonny couldn't stop talking.

You have four legs, you have two ears, Jonny told Xena as he opened her mouth and counted her teeth. *Oh, you have a boo-boo on your nose! I want to put a Band-Aid on it.*

Once they got home, the words kept coming as Jonny played with Xena in the family room, throwing the ball

and talking, talking, talking.

Jonny had found a friend, a companion and a therapist all wrapped up in a furry brown package.

Before Xena came into his life, getting Jonny to eat or touch food was always an issue. But soon he was eagerly making Xena's dinner, cutting up bananas and adding blueberries. Not allowed to play with her until he gets his homework done, Xena has even become an academic incentive.

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Xena triumphant

In March 2013, Xena became an official member of the Hickey family. Linda took over her Facebook page, posting updates and sharing photographs, and Xena's fan base continued to grow.

At first Linda was hesitant to reveal that her son had autism on Facebook, but eventually she did, describing how much Xena had helped Jonny.

That summer, Linda got a phone call from the national American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, saying that Xena had been named Dog of the Year in its annual Humane Awards. Given to the dog that exemplifies the organization's anti-cruelty mission, the winner is selected by an ASPCA-appointed committee from entries nominated by the public.

Linda doesn't know who nominated Xena for the honor, but the next thing she knew, a film crew was at their Johns Creek home getting footage, and the Hickeys were preparing to go to New York to accept the award.

"To go up to New York with Jonny, put him in a hotel room, it completely rocks his world," Linda says. "It is so big. We went up a week earlier than the event, hoping that we could kind of ease him into it."

When the big day came, Linda went ahead to Cipriani's restaurant, the site of the awards luncheon, leaving Jonny at the hotel with her sister and her niece to get ready.

NBC was filming the event and eager to get Jonny on camera.

Is he here yet? they asked.

Linda called her sister.

We've got him dressed, he's doing really well, we're on our way, she said.

To help reduce the chance of Jonny becoming anxious from all the attention, the network set up a quiet, private

room with a small camera crew for his interview. Once she saw everything was to her liking, Linda left the room to find her son.

Where's Jonny? she asked her sister.

Oh, he's in there having an interview with NBC, she told Linda.

"Sure enough, there he is with Jill Rappaport and the big boom mic and all the cameras are on him," recalled Linda, still amazed by her son's moment in the spotlight.

When it was time for the main event, Xena's story was projected on a big screen, including footage from the Hickeys' home.

"It just killed me to watch it," Linda says. "I was bawling my eyes out and then they called me on stage to present the award."

Pulling herself together, she walked up onstage to give her speech, when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye.

Jonny, who she'd left at the table with her niece, was suddenly beside her on stage.

Linda held her breath, not knowing what was going to happen next, when Jonny moved to the edge of the stage, raised his arms and proclaimed: *We are in New York City!*

"The crowd went crazy," recalls Linda. "It was an amazing moment. You have this little boy who has all these difficulties in social environments, yet he'll get up onstage in front of 600 people and say that. It blew my mind."

And it was all because of Xena.

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Living the life

Xena changed Chrissy Kaczynski's life, too.

After the ASPCA honor, Xena became a regular in therapy programs and presentations at local prisons and schools.

She often runs 5Ks for animal rescues and shelters, with Grant on the other end of the leash. It was at those events where the family kept running into the same person – Sarah Draper, a deputy commissioner at the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. She mentioned that she wanted to start a pet program for the

department.

“Boy, do I have the girl for you,” Linda told her.

Chrissy is now the Animal Services Program Manager at the Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. She started the Rescue 2 Restore program, which brings youth housed in Georgia’s juvenile detention centers and rescue/shelter dogs together with the aim of improving the lives of both.

Meanwhile, Xena continues to be recognized for her superpowers.

Nominated by Linda for the American Humane Association’s Hero Dog of the Year award, Xena recently won Emerging Hero Dog of the Year, the only category for dogs not trained for a specific job (military, search and rescue, guide, etc.).

Next weekend, Xena and her family, along with foster mom Chrissy, travel to Beverly Hills as one of the eight finalists for the overall title as American Humane Association’s Hero Dog of the Year award. The winner will be announced Saturday.

She’ll likely meet Betty White, a prospect that thrills her mom.

It’s just another death-defying feat for Xena the Warrior Puppy, who is living a life that no one would have thought possible two years ago.

Unlike her superhero namesake, her courage might not change the world, but she has changed the life of one little boy and continues to touch thousands more.

HOW WE GOT THE STORY

I started following Friends of DeKalb Animals, the organization that saved Xena, on Facebook in February 2012. A few days after clicking that “like” button, I got my own throwaway pup, Caruso, who was dumped near Milam Park in Clarkston. There are so many stories of neglected and unwanted animals and many don’t have a happy ending. Xena’s story and the efforts of the caring people around her made me want to help more of those animals get the homes they deserve. I hope it inspires you, too.

Shane Harrison

Digital producer for Features

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About the reporter

Shane Harrison grew up in Pendleton, S.C., surrounded by dogs and parked in front of a cheap plastic record player, feeding it disc after disc of seven-inch vinyl. He spent several years working in record stores before landing at the AJC in 1990. After more than a decade writing about music, he now creates and curates lifestyle, arts and entertainment content for MyAJC.com.

Next week: How Grant Henry went from church deacon to owner of a bar called Church.

KEEP UP WITH XENA

Follow the journey of Xena on Facebook at www.facebook.com/xenaandjonny and find Friends of DeKalb Animals at www.facebook.com/friendsofdekalbanimals and www.friendsofdekalbanimals.com

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Hnancy902

[Report](#)

I follow Zena and Friends of Dekalb Animals. I loved reading your story.

8:24 a.m. Sep. 19, 2014



ngf1

[Report](#)

Beautiful story. Classic- Don't judge the book by the cover. Xena may be part pit bull BUT she is ALL love.

7:27 p.m. Sep. 19, 2014



cmmartin

[Report](#)

I love animals (cats more often than dogs, though!). This story makes me cry every time I read it because I know Xena and other rescue animals are special for so many reasons. We think we are doing a favor by rescuing them to give them the home and love that they deserve, but most of the time it is us who truly end up being the most blessed by their love and presence in return. Please consider adopting a rescue and hurrah for Xena and others like her who brighten our world each and every day they are with us. The sad person (or people) who abandoned and abused her didn't appreciate the love and caring that she wanted so freely to share with her true forever family. Clara Martin Fayetteville, GA

6:34 a.m. Sep. 21, 2014