

INCREDIBULL STORIES

MY SWEET SIXTEEN

STORY BY // Kim Wolf
PHOTOGRAPHY BY // Kim Wolf

Every dog deserves his day, but for this fateful dog that day came after 14 years of abuse and suffering. On September 25, 2009 the Pennsylvania SPCA (pspca.org) and the Philadelphia Police Department rescued "Sarge" and 30 other dogs as part of a major animal cruelty raid in Philadelphia. The raid – which was documented on season one, episode 14 of the television show *Animal Cops: Philadelphia* – was a culmination of extensive surveillance and undercover investigation by humane law enforcement officers. While his former owner was prosecuted on dozens of animal cruelty charges, "Sarge" spent five months in protective custody at the Pennsylvania SPCA where he received veterinary care, behavior evaluation, and much needed tender loving care. Although his old scars, fractures, and untreated wounds told a grim story of abuse and exploitation, "Sarge's" eyes confirmed that his spirit was still strong and he was waiting for his second chance to be loved.

"Sarge's" second chance came in February, 2010 when he was adopted by Kim Wolf and Thad Stringer of Philadelphia. At the age of 14 and ½ years, "Sarge" was born again and he learned – perhaps for the first time – what it felt like to enjoy life as a beloved pet. He joined the couple's five other dogs, including a chubby Pug who instantly fell in love with "Sarge" (and hasn't left his side since). "People always ask how long it took for him to be rehabilitated after all those years of abuse," says Kim. "The truth is he did not require any rehabilitation. He just needed a safe and responsible home where he could relax, be free of pain, and be loved." Because of the injuries he sustained in his former life combined with his age-related arthritis, "Sarge" had trouble walking and needed to be carried most places. "He keeps our arm muscles in great shape," says Thad. "But it's the least we can do for him."

The couple quickly realized that "Sarge" had a unique way of connecting with people, particularly those who had also faced challenges in their lives. So in April, 2010 he became certified as a therapy dog with Pals For Life (palsforlife.org), a non-profit organization that utilizes

animals to provide positive, therapeutic engagement for individuals with physical or mental disabilities. "Sarge" passed his test on the first try and began visiting nursing homes, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers. Because he suffers from severe arthritis and has to be carried everywhere, "Sarge" bonded quickly with elders who also struggle with age-related ailments. "He empathizes with elders on a level that younger dogs are not able to. And the fact that he's still working at age 15 (105 in dog years) means a lot to them," Kim conveys.

While some organizations discriminated against "Sarge" because of his breed, Pals For Life welcomed him with open arms. Pals For Life founder/director Paula Keilich adds, "He is a wonderful dog who came from a life without love and now spends his life giving love to those who don't have it. He is everything a Pals For Life therapy dog could be: gentle, charismatic, empathetic, and most of all hugely affectionate. We are so fortunate to have him in our program. We love him! He's the one, the only, and the best!"

"Sarge" also volunteers his time visiting schools to teach children about responsible pet ownership, kindness to animals, and respect for all breeds of dogs. He empowers children to be proud of who they are and to ignore stereotypes about physical appearances. "He shows kids that everyone is an individual and deserves to be treated as such, whether they're a dog or a human being," Kim says proudly. In May, 2010 Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter awarded "Sarge," "Humane Educator of the Year" for his service to the community.

In August, 2010 "Sarge" accomplished a significant milestone by launching "The Sarge Fund" at the Philadelphia Animal Welfare Society (phillypaws.org). With support from the Animal Farm Foundation (animalfarmfoundation.org) and private donations, the Sarge Fund subsidizes spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinations, and microchips for Pit Bulls and Pit Bull mixes in Philadelphia. Like most urban cities, Philadelphia's Pit Bulls pour into animal shelters through no fault of their own, and are euthanized at staggering rates. The Sarge Fund subsidizes spay/neuter surgeries so that all Pit Bull type dogs get a chance to live long, healthy, and happy lives. "We love "Sarge" and we love this breed, so we want to help all Pit Bulls thrive rather than end up killed at shelters due to overpopulation," Kim says. "Sarge" works hard, but he also finds time to party. In September, 2010 he celebrated his "sweet sixteen" by hosting a huge bash in Philadelphia with more than a 100 friends, canine and human. In lieu of gifts he received, "Sarge" collected toys and treats for local shelter dogs still waiting to find a home, and he raised more than \$1,000 for his fund. The guest of honor was Philadelphia assistant district attorney Barbara Paul, who prosecuted "Sarge's" former owner. Barbara met "Sarge" in person for the first time at his "Sweet Sixteen" party and described the occasion as, "The highlight of her career."

Through his resilience and perseverance, his love for all living beings, and his service to the community at large, his legacy will endure as a true ambassador to our beloved breed. To learn more about "Sarge" and to follow his adventures, visit his blog at

www.elderbulls.blogspot.com. 🐾

