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PETS

Owned by a Newf

*Dog lovers from around the globe share a passion for the Newfoundland dog
— and no one more than Gina Destro-Biro of Ohio*

By Danette Dooley
Special To The Telegram

The Flintstones seem to have taken hold in Gina Destro-Biro's Ohio home. Her Newfoundland dogs all bear names from the popular cartoon.

"I'm proudly owned by Pebbles, Dino and Bedrock, and yes we do have a Yabba-Dabba Doo time," Destro-Biro laughs during a phone interview.

Destro-Biro and her husband, Randy, welcomed their first Newfoundland dog into their home 16 years ago.

"Randy's parents were breeders of Irish setters and had shown them for many years. I grew up with dogs all my life - a poodle, Labrador retriever, Irish setter and mixed breeds. We love all animals, but have a special passion for Newfoundlands," she says.

Destro-Biro is the founder of several websites promoting the Newfoundland dog, as well as numerous rescue clubs throughout North America.

"People absolutely love this gentle, giant breed, and especially children, who are magnetically attracted to their enormous size," she says.

Her website, www.newfneighborhood.com, has dozens of photos of Destro-Biro and other Newfoundland dog owners out and about with their dogs in the northeast Ohio area. There are about 60 families in her area that own at least one small-pony sized Newf, she says.

"It's a way for people who share the same interests to get together informally without a club or dues or politics. It's just to have fun," she says of their regular outings that are promoted on the website.

"We usually gather once a month at a park, or something similar, with our Newfs and just enjoy a day together. The people of the neighbourhood pick a place to gather or let each other know of events in our area that are pet friendly."

Destro-Biro named her first Newfoundland dog Panda.

When Panda passed away at age 10 after a bout with cancer, Destro-Biro says she was "beside herself." That was about six years ago.

"I had not realized how much Panda had truly impacted my life. It was the breed - the personality, their demeanour, their characteristics. And my heart was just breaking. I had a void in it so big. And I might get choked up here," she says.

The dog lover knew the only thing that could help her get over her tremendous loss was welcoming another large black Panda-like puppy into her home.



Above, Dino, a Newfoundland dog owned by Gina Destro-Biro of Ohio, is a therapy dog for sick kids. Below, Destro-Biro's Newfoundlands - she has three altogether - also love to hang out in her pool.



After talking with several reputable breeders, she was told getting a Newfoundland puppy would mean quite a wait. It's not the news she needed to hear.

"It would be two or three litters down the road, and that's only if the bitch got pregnant. So, there were so many ifs involved. I just didn't know what I was going to do."

She then contacted Penn-Ohio Newfoundland Club (PONC). PONC is a non-profit organization recognized by the American Kennel Club-sanctioned Newfoundland Club of America, established to protect the interests of and educate others about the Newfoundland breed of dog.

After several discussions with club representatives - and after meeting the stringent criteria of adopting a Newfoundland dog from the club - Destro-Biro was told about a 10-month-old dog that was looking for a good home. Just like her affection for Panda, it was love at first sight, she says.

"I took one look at this dog, who is now known as Pebbles, and I dropped to my knees. And I asked them, besides giving you an adoption fee, what can I do to help with rescues?"

Destro-Biro - who now owns three Newfoundland dogs, all of which are rescue dogs - works as a website designer.

Since adopting Pebbles, she volunteers her time in promoting PONC and other organizations that work to keep Newfoundland dogs in good homes. She is also the founder of www.lovenewfs.com, her company-based website from which she sells her own specially designed Newfoundland dog novelty items that are as unique as the breed itself.

It's unfortunate just how many Newfoundland dogs need rescuing, she says.

"Since Josh (a Newfoundland dog) won best in show a couple of years back at Madison Square Gardens in New York, it's like when the first Beethoven movie came out. Everybody wanted a Saint Bernard. And it was the same with 101 Dalmatians. So, I wondered when Josh won what was going to become of the Newfoundland breed."

Because so many people went on to buy Newfoundland dogs not knowing about the tremendous amount of care they require, Destro-Biro says the No. 1 priority now in the U.S. is finding good families for those that end up without a home.

She has fostered about 30 dogs herself, she says.

"Fostering is very difficult and I cry every time a foster walks out my door to go to its permanent home. Whether he's been a day here or six months here, it's still difficult letting the dog go."

Newfoundland dogs are a lot like children, she says. They need guidance. Their size is the first thing that catches the attention of strangers, and it's also the main reason why such a dog should never be left alone with small children.

"As gentle as the dogs can be, you don't leave them in the room with a two-year-old and expect the dog to walk by without knocking the toddler over," she says.

Another factor that results in dogs ending up in foster care is that owners don't realize the costs that come with owning a large-breed dog.

"People don't look past the 40-pound bag of dog food a week. But, when you walk into the vet's office, it's no less than \$100 a pop. And that's just for the maintenance. Then you've got the preventive care, and everything is (costed) by weight with meds."

At the end of the day, however, Destro-Biro says only those who have lived with a Newfoundland dog can truly understand the pleasure this gentle giant can bring to any family.

"I've never seen a breed of dog that is consistent 100 per cent of the time. So wonderful with children, elderly people, mean people, good people, loud people, big people, little people."

She has never been to Newfoundland, but Destro-Biro says she's met and formed a friendship with Jackie Petrie - a Newfoundland dog breeder from this province.

"I had the pleasure of meeting this wonderful woman at the (U.S.) nationals two years ago. We knew of each other because we belong to a group of about 1,200 people from all over the world who own Newfs."

"Jackie has been such a dear sweetheart. We had dinner together, we had cod tails (sic) at the reception hour and I was able to truly spend some quality times with her to share stories, sad ones and happy ones."

Destro-Biro says no dog has touched her heart or filled her life so completely as has the Newfoundland breed.

Destro-Biro says those lucky enough to have welcomed Newfoundland dogs into their hearts meet each other at the nationals hosted by the Newfoundland Club of America and held throughout the United States.

"If you wanna see a whole lotta love, your breath will be taken away at the site of over 800 Newfies gathered in the same place at the same time!"

Facts about Newfoundland Dogs

A Newfoundland dog helped rescue survivors from the Titanic.

A Newfoundland dog once saved Napoleon Bonaparte.

It takes 18 months to two years for a male Newfoundland dog to reach maturity. Once it does, it can weigh up to 150 pounds.

The soft undercoat of a Newfoundland dog can be spun like sheep's wool.

Although primarily black, Newfoundland dogs can be white, brown and grey, and called Landseers.

The Newfoundland dog is the most powerful swimmer in the canine world.

Aside from its swimming abilities, the Newfoundland dog is also an avid tracker.

The Best of Show award at the 2004 Westminster Dog Show was awarded to Josh, a Newfoundland dog.

Source: Heroic Companion: A Brief History of the Newfoundland Dog, by Patrick Pickett
