

Couple hopes to return gesture after nonprofit finds their lost dog



Matt Rock lost his adopted hound mix 20 minutes after he brought the dog home. Luckily, he met Anne Wills, founder of Dogs Finding Dogs, a nonprofit that helps track lost dogs and return them to their owners. (Jen Rynda, Baltimore Sun Media Group)

By **Lauren Loricchio**

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When Matt and Jackie Rock lost their dog Brad in early October, they were heartbroken.

The Relay couple had just adopted the 4-year-old hound mix from Pet Connect Rescue in Potomac and brought him to his new home. But minutes after getting him out of the car, he escaped and took off for a nearby wooded area.

"We searched from 3 p.m. that day through the night," said Matt Rock, 39.

The couple worried they would never see their dog again.

"He didn't even really know his name," Jackie Rock said. "So I thought — this dog doesn't even know where he is and has no clue who we are."

Luckily, they learned about a woman living nearby who could help. A neighbor told them about Anne Wills, who runs the nonprofit Dogs Finding Dogs, a tracking service that helps find lost dogs.

Matt knocked on her door at around 10 p.m. that night and she agreed to help them find their missing pet.

The next day, Wills assembled a search team of four volunteers and three dogs to track Brad down. The dogs are trained to pursue a scent, which is how they locate missing dogs.

"Dogs don't think like we do," Wills said. "They don't discriminate tracking a dog versus a human...it's a game to them."

An item with the dog's scent, is presented to the tracking dog, Wills explained. They follow the scent until the trail ends and then they signal their trainer, who rewards them, she said.

Following a week of investigating, Wills and her search team of 18 trackers and their 18 search dogs, were able to find Brad and bring him home.

It was a joyous moment for the entire family. "I felt really happy," said their daughter Kaylin Rock, 9, who attends Relay Elementary.

"If I had never met Anne, there's no way I would have been able to get him home safely," Matt said.

After being on the receiving end of the organization's help, the Rock family wants to help other families who lose their dogs. They plan to train Brad to become a tracking dog.

"Our hope is in about a month to begin cross training him with Anne to become one of the search and rescue dogs for Dogs Finding Dogs," Matt said. "We want to give back to Anne everything that she gave us."

Tracking dogs used by the organization are hand-selected and tested for working capabilities and hunting capabilities, Wills said.

Wills said dogs that "go crazy" for toys are the ones that make good tracking dogs. German shepherds, Labrador retrievers and hounds are among the favored breeds.

"His dog is a hound mix and they are meant to be good hunters," Wills said. "It remains to be seen whether he can do the work."

"Not all dogs like to do this," she said. "Just because they're a certain breed — a hunting dog or working dog — they may not have the characteristics to do the work."

The nonprofit was founded by Wills eight years ago, after she got her first dog, Heidi, a German shepherd Labrador retriever mix that needed obedience training.

Once properly trained, Heidi and Wills assisted the police when they received calls asking for help finding lost dogs.

"Within six months, I had collected some friends from the training facility, I quit my job and hence, Dogs Finding Dogs was born," said Wills, a former manager at a manufacturing firm.

"I never would have dreamed I would have done this sort of work — I sat behind a desk for 40 years," Wills said. "This is a complete 180-degree turn."

Each year, the organization tracks dogs an average of 500 missing dogs in Maryland, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania and Virginia, Wills said.

About 65 percent of their cases are stolen dogs, the majority of those being small dogs that are easily stolen due to their size, Wills said.

Wills said what sets the organization apart from other "pet detectives" is that the group doesn't charge high hourly rates for pet tracking.

"If you charge an hourly rate, it costs too much money," Wills said. "People can't afford that."

The nonprofit asks for a \$200 donation and in some cases, reimbursement for mileage, Wills said.

For those who can't afford the donation, the organization won't turn anyone away, Wills said.

Wills recommends that those looking for ways to keep their pets safe keep their furry friend on a leash at all times and make sure dogs have obedience training.

"What we do is, we tend to humanize our dogs — we all do it," Wills said. "But we tend to forget that they're an animal. You have to keep on guard at all times to protect them from themselves."

Wills recommends that dog owners don't use retractable leashes for dogs that often allow dogs to pull and get loose from their owners' grip.

"We have to be responsible to make sure that they're safe," Wills said.

To learn more about the organization, go to: dogsfindingdogs.com.