



StubbyDog™
Rediscover the pit bull.

In Hiding

Escaping a life in the dark when a town banned pit bulls

By Micaela Myers



Otis in hiding



Otis today

Imagine being locked in a dusty shed for months on end. You can't go outside because people might see that you look like a pit bull and turn you in. If you're turned in, you'll be killed.

This is exactly how Otis lived after his hometown of Fayette, Missouri, passed a breed ban in Feb. 2009. The ordinance banned acquiring pit bulls. Pit bulls already in the town could be grandfathered in if their owners met certain requirements, including showing proof of \$100,000 of liability insurance, muzzling their pets when in public (on a leash no longer than four feet) and meeting specific confinement requirements for dogs kept outside. However, with a median household income in Fayette of only \$32,925 (in 2008), many residents couldn't afford to meet the requirements

"These people can't afford \$1,500 a year for a rider on their insurance policy," said Melody Whitworth, the Columbia, Missouri, area representative for Dogs Deserve Better, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping chained dogs.

"There are a lot of dogs in hiding [in Fayette], and Otis was one of those dogs in hiding," said Kathryn Ward, the Fayette area representative for Dogs Deserve Better.

When the ordinance went into effect, Otis's guardian couldn't afford the insurance policy. "Otis ended up being hidden in a shed in his backyard and chained," Whitworth said. "This went on for months and months. His owner would go out and feed him when he felt like his neighbors weren't home and wouldn't see him."



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When Otis's guardian had to call an ambulance for his mother-in-law one night, the authorities discovered the dog, and his guardian was cited. "[He] was told to either get rid of the dog or the dog would be killed," Ward said. The guardian contacted the local shelter, which luckily referred him to Ward, who had been working with the shelter, trying to save as many area pit bulls as possible.

"He worked directly with Dogs Deserve Better," Whitworth said. "He signed a relinquishment form and allowed us to put Otis on Petfinder to try and rehome him in order to keep him out of a shelter situation."

After months of being tied in the dark, Otis would growl when approached by strangers, but Ward and Whitworth saw this as a consequence of his circumstances rather than a reflection on his true nature. Prior to the ordinance, Otis had fathered several litters of puppies. One of the first things Dogs Deserve Better did was to arrange to have Otis neutered.

While Whitworth worked to find a new home for Otis, Ward tried to educate his guardian about pet overpopulation and the problems associated with chaining (including increased aggression).

"He said that he could see it was wrong to chain him," she said. "My feeling is that education of the people is the only thing that's going to change the way pit bulls are treated. That is where people need to focus their efforts instead of these stupid bans that don't do anything but further harm the dogs."

She said that according to her research, dog bites in Fayette have actually increased since the ordinance. Through their collective efforts, a miracle was in the works for Otis. Unlike most victims of breed bans, he was about to get a second chance. Jessica Murphy of Columbia was searching through the listings on Petfinder.

"I came across a picture of this dog in what appeared to be a barn, and he just looked pitiful. It was so sad," Murphy said. "There was just something about him. When I found out about his story, it made it that much more heartbreaking. I had to meet that dog. I had to help that dog."

Murphy's husband agreed, and the couple went to meet the then 4-year-old Otis.

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“His allergies were horrible, I guess from living in his barn that was so dusty. His eyes looked like they were popping out of his head,” Murphy said. “He came right up to me, and I fell in love.”

Jessica and Robert have two children, ages 6 and 7, and are expecting their third child. “He’s very patient with the kids,” Murphy said. “He’s the best dog we’ve ever had.”

A year after his adoption, Otis now lives with three other dogs, including his son, whom the couple also rescued. Today, Otis has his own spot on the couch, inside with the family.

His transformation from a backyard dog in hiding to a beloved family pet illustrates both the tragedy of breed-specific legislation, which will sentence dogs to death just for the way they look, as well as the fact that all dogs, regardless of breed, are a reflection of how they’re kept and treated.

