SHARING THE GIFT of SPEECH

BY CAMILLE MOFFITT

The sign in the pet store said Siberian Husky, regularly $399, weekend special—$149. Glancing in the shop window, I noticed that inside a cage lay sleeping not a frisky puppy, but a long, lanky, half-grown dog. Against my better judgment, I stepped in.

I learned from the salesman that the dog, now five months old, had been in the cage since he was eight to ten weeks old. Immediately, I asked to see the dog out of the cage, bearing neither the intent nor the cash to purchase him, but the desire to free him—if only for a few minutes—from his prison. But when the salesman opened the cage door, my heart broke: the dog cowered against the back of the cage, too fearful to venture out.

I had to leave the pet store. I couldn’t imagine a dog being denied such basic rights as walking around, running, lapping water from a bowl instead of sipping it from a hamster’s bottle, being forced to sleep on a wire rack, and having no stimulation, not even a toy, in a store full of pet toys for sale. Neither could I imagine having such limited choices in my life: to stand or lie down, to open or close my eyes. I dared not imagine this nightmare continuing week after week, month after month. I had difficulty sleeping that night.

The following day, my three young sons began begging me to go back and buy “Buddy.” They couldn’t understand the adult reasoning that buying the dog would support abhorrent caretaking, thereby promoting more dogs to being subjected similarly; we already had one “horse” of a dog that lives better than any human I know; someone else would probably buy him at the new sale price; and assigning a name to the dog was hitting below the belt.

Twice that afternoon I secretly telephoned the pet store, only to find out that “Buddy” had remained captive. Monday, 9:00 a.m., the Nashville Humane Association informed me that no law exists that governs the length of time a dog can be caged. There is no law that requires any mandatory “free time,” so that the animals could exercise or a regulation regarding the size of the dog vs. the size of the cage.

By 10 a.m., despite adult reasoning, I headed across town to buy Buddy his freedom. There, a sensitive young caretaker informed me, in confidence, that she used to get in trouble for letting the dog out of the cage in the mornings and had to stop when her job became jeopardized. She wept with joy when I told her that I was buying him.

“You’re going home!” she cried. Home he is. Although the pet store is gone from our lives, it is not easily forgotten. I thought of it when Buddy ran smack into the coffee table, unaccustomed to maneuvering around objects; I thought of it every time his massive self sat and whined at the top of the stairs, afraid to amble down; I thought of it as he licked his sore leg muscles heretofore rarely used; I thought of it when I had to coax him out onto the unfamiliar turf we call grass; and I thought of it when I watched him put his head under water trying to get a drink from his dog bowl.

No, I will never forget the pet store until laws are enacted which protect animals. So a plea to all who care: contact your representative and become the voice for those who lack speech and defense.

Why Buddy Had to Be Rescued

Unfortunately, we are all too aware of the frustrations described by Camille Moffitt in her essay. No state has laws governing the length of time an animal may be kept in a pet shop; only a handful have laws we feel are progressive in the standards they set for pet-shop operation. We have found it an uphill battle to pass such protective measures; without them, local humane societies face an almost impossible task to protect the Buddys of the world. We suggest, as does Camille Moffitt, that HSUS members work to enact state and local laws that impose strict requirements on pet shops, covering adequate cage size and construction and the amount of mandatory exercise, food, water, and veterinary care the animals receive. Failing that, if members come upon a situation like Buddy’s, they should first express concern to shop management and then complain to mall management, if appropriate, or write a letter to the editor of the local paper. Organize friends to call and inquire politely about the condition of the animal in the shop and express their concern. Pet industry officials think the general public doesn’t share our standards for pet care—Camille Moffitt proves that they are wrong.

—Ann Church, HSUS state legislative coordinator

Camille Moffitt is a free-lance writer and columnist for The Tennessean, Nashville, Tennessee, in which this essay originally appeared.