LOCATION: Tippah County, Mississippi
ANIMALS ASSISTED: 65 mixed-breed dogs

The 3-month-old tan-and-white puppy should have been bouncing around, jumping in my arms and chewing up toys. Instead, he was warily stepping across the tile floor of his kennel at The HSUS’s temporary shelter.

It was early August and our rescue team had just removed him and dozens of other dogs from the property of a Mississippi hoarder—mixtures of corgis, shepherds and hounds all blended into one. The puppy was a classic example of what often happens in hoarding situations: Taken from the only life he’d ever known, however deprived it was, he was afraid of everything. Even people trying to help.

I’ve been in rescue work for 16 years, six of those with The HSUS, and these hoarding cases are often riddled with challenges. You’re not dealing with companion animals but rather semi-feral, pack-mentality dogs. They’ve been fighting for food, water and territory. Those high in the pack order are stronger because they’ve been eating. Low-ranking dogs are malnourished and often have injuries.

Large enclosures, like the ones on this property, make it difficult to remove fearful animals. We sometimes use tools such as catch-poles and leashes. But our goal is always to scoop up as many as we can by hand because they’re more receptive to human touch than something around their neck.

As we drove onto the property, more than a dozen animals ran barking to the front gate, held together with bungee cords and wire. Shallow potholes, dug by the dogs for relief from the sweltering heat, dotted the mostly dirt enclosure. The driveway disappeared into thick vegetation, making it impossible to see the house or other enclosures. But we could hear many more dogs barking in the distance.

As we walked through the property, we found a litter of puppies in an old barn and a couple of dogs with broken legs. We didn’t see food or water, just empty bags of bread and dog food in a shed.

In the first section we cleared, a pocket full of treats worked wonders with the younger dogs, who ran up nervous but excited to see us. A couple of friendly adult dogs all but begged to be taken off the property, like one black-and-tan shepherd mix who kept jumping to kiss me and sneaking treats.

Fleas, ticks and chigger bites covered the dogs, and many were underweight. One skinny pup lay in a pothole amidst all the com-
motion. And then there was Sasha, a reddish corgi mix with a deep puncture wound and broken leg, probably from defending herself or fighting for food. She later lost the leg to bone infection.

We pulled a frightened beagle mix from under a car and removed floorboards from a dilapidated structure to retrieve another scared dog. The animals probably had no idea why we were touching them.

As the dogs’ first line to freedom, we did everything we could to minimize their stress. We used slow-approach techniques with the runners, like walking side-by-side human fence-style to usher them into a confined space. One dog, realizing he had no place to run, responded to this tactic by simply lying down.

In one section, another rescuer and I were circled by about 15 barking and lunging dogs—pack mentality at its best. We fractured the pack by luring them in twos and threes into a different section, where they weren’t nearly as threatening. And away from their pack, many of the dogs changed. They were able to figure themselves out as a dog, a companion animal, and started looking at us like people who weren’t going to hurt them.

At the shelter, volunteers made sure the dogs had fresh food and water. That, and a clean, comfortable place to sleep, made all the difference. By the second day, the dogs were running to the front of their kennels and wagging their tails whenever we approached. Even the most aggressive dogs came around. They would seek affection, sniff and lean into me and take treats from my hand. By the second week, some were playing with toys.

Even the timid tan-and-white puppy took to sprawling tummy-up in my lap for some love. After 16 years, it’s still humbling to witness the transformations when animals are removed from a desperate existence.

Working with these dogs, crawling into their kennels and gently laying a hand on them, not pulling them out but just petting them and letting them know it’s OK—that moment of soft touch from beginning to end is what turns them around.

+ ON THE iPAD: Watch a Rowdy’s-eye view of the rescue.