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# FREEING HAMILTON

My beagle, rescued from an animal testing lab a year ago, isn't the only one who has undergone a transformation  
**BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN**

Last summer, a beagle with a blue tattoo in his left ear dropped into my home as if from another planet. He was underweight, and when I lowered him onto a dog bed, it was clear he'd never, in his four years of life, encountered anything so squishy and soft. He clung to that bed as if it were a life raft.

Among the few things I knew about this creature: His vocal cords had been cut, and he had probably never seen stairs, so I didn't bother blocking off the second level of my Capitol Hill rowhouse. When he dared to leave, he did so guardedly. Catching his reflection in the side of a car was enough to send him pulling me home, frantically. His anxiety drove him to several escape attempts, once maneuvering through my

balcony railing onto a neighbor's roof.

In a way, this dog did arrive from another world—one in which breeders send their puppies to laboratories to become testing animals, each identified by a tattooed tracking number. My beagle was rescued with six others from a Virginia lab by a nonprofit organization called the Beagle Freedom Project. On the day these hounds left the only life they'd known, it was clear that even the most basic canine experiences—walking on grass and touching humans—were alien.

Each of the DC7, as they became known, was named after a Founding Father. Six weeks after I began fostering Alexander Hamilton, his personality was still clouded by fear and I didn't know how much he would change. After all,

labs claim that these dogs—with their lack of exposure to the real world—don't make suitable pets. Freeing them only draws public attention to the 70,000 dogs still in testing facilities (many of which are beagles, because they're so docile). According to the Beagle Freedom Project, this is how labs justify killing them as standard practice, discarding Hamiltons as if they were test tubes.

I told Hammy that if I adopted him, every day would be an adventure. "You'll have to be very brave," I said. He looked at me with his quiet brown eyes. We struck a deal.

As summer turned to fall, Hammy relaxed enough to walk around the block. I remember the first time I saw his tail wag in his sleep, and I imagined his dreams about running free. His veterinarian told me that his vocal cords—which had been cut so lab techs wouldn't be disturbed by howling—could grow back. Before long, he was barking at the mailman. My neighbor quipped, "He's like Pinocchio! He's turning into a real dog."

Hammy wasn't the only one who'd been

*The DC7 beagles—and an eighth dog belonging to one of the families—during their reunion this summer.*



transformed. Sitting with him for hours upon hours, trying to fill his early silences with comforting words, had changed me, too. I started to boycott products tested on animals, buying laundry detergent and mascara from “cruelty-free” companies such as Method and Lush. Uncharacteristically, I took on a cause, telling my beagle’s story to all who would listen and showing them the tattoo in his ear.

This past spring, Minnesota became the first state to require that dogs and cats in taxpayer-funded laboratories be made available for adoption after testing rather than put to death. Around the same time, Hammy went for a 50-mile ride in his bike trailer, camped, joined me on a standup paddleboard, and visited his 16th state.

This summer, the DC7 returned to Washington to celebrate a year of freedom. As the families and dogs walked around the Capitol grounds, tourists asked if a beagle convention was under way. I looked at all the wagging tails and marveled at the difference a year of love and patience can make.

These days, Hammy’s need for human touch is profound. When he’s sleeping, I watch little *pffts* of breath leak out of his cheeks. I run my hand over his soft face and floppy ears and wonder what they did to him on the other planet. He wakes, stretches, and looks at me with sleepy eyes. Then he paws me insistently, wanting affection. And I oblige.

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*Washington writer Melanie D.G. Kaplan’s website is melaniedgkaplan.com.*



**The author (center) and her dog, Alexander Hamilton, with two other DC7 owners and their dogs, James Madison and George Washington.**

PHOTOGRAPH OF DC7 FAMILIES BY ANDREW PROPP

## How to Handle Fearful Dogs

Dealing with a traumatized dog? Though many cases require help from vets, behavior consultants, or trainers, here are tips from pros.

BY MARISA M. KASHINO



**DR. E. KATHRYN MEYER**

Veterinarian  
 Veterinary Behavior Clinic

**Educate yourself.** There are many resources on how you can help traumatized dogs. One good place to start is [YourDogsFriend.org](http://YourDogsFriend.org).

**Never pet any dog, especially a fearful one, without “asking” for permission.**

After a dog takes a treat from your hand and comes back to sniff, move your fingers gently to scratch him under the chin. If he likes the touch, he’ll move forward. If he doesn’t, he’ll back away.

**Use tasty food to create positive associations with people and situations.**

Simply being able to enjoy a treat can help a dog feel more relaxed.

**Don’t verbally or physically correct frightened dogs.** You’ll simply teach them you’re scary. There will be plenty of time to do training once you have a secure relationship with the animal.



**ALEXANDRA DILLEY**

Behavior and training director  
 Washington Animal Rescue League

**To keep a dog from backing out of his collar, use a harness and a martingale-style collar, which is designed to tighten without choking if the animal pulls.** Panicked dogs are at much greater risk of escape.

**New people can be terrifying.** Be assertive with well-meaning people who want to get too close or push too far with your dog.

**To build trust, hand-feed meals.** Doing so will reinforce that you’re a safe and positive resource. If your dog is too fearful to eat directly from you, scoop a bit of dog food into your hand and hold it out, or place it on the ground next to you.

**It’s okay to soothe a frightened dog.**

It won’t make his fear worse. 

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