What’s the most amazing animal transformation you’ve witnessed?

That’s the question we asked for this issue’s Coffee Break, and you responded by telling us about some turnarounds that remind us that change truly is possible, and that even the most fearful, neglected, and abused animals deserve another chance.

Ollie

Leroy has a new name and a fresh start. Leroy had become anti-social after living alone with an elderly shut-in. When he arrived, Leroy was terrified of everyone and everything. He was the most aggressive cat we had ever seen. His caregivers had to bundle their arms in towels to protect themselves from his swipes. His family remembered a time when Leroy was a friendly, loving boy. But after years of isolation, he had regressed into a fearful cat that his family could not manage. At their wit’s end, they called the Cat’s Meow for help.

Looking in his eyes, we knew that friendly cat was still inside him. Getting that friendly cat out again took some time, effort, and a lot of patience. Three volunteers worked intensively with Leroy and gradually earned his trust. After several months, we were encouraged to see Leroy begin to play, and he would do just about anything for a treat. One Saturday, Susie stopped by the adoption center looking for a cat for her new home. She visited with many of the other cats before getting to Leroy’s room. “He picked me out,” Susie said. “He was rubbing up against my leg.” She started giving him treats and saw the friendly cat we all knew was inside him. She visited Leroy at the adoption center several times a week, letting him get to know her and feel comfortable with her before taking him home. With his fresh start, Leroy got a new name and is now called Ollie. To ease the transition, Susie started Ollie off in a smaller room. We were all excited to see how he would adjust to his new surroundings. After a couple days, Susie noticed Ollie was spending time in a rocking chair in the room so she went in and sat in it. “He jumped up in my lap, and he flipped over so I could rub his stomach,” she said. Everyone, including Susie, was surprised at how quickly Ollie adjusted. He now has a special place near Susie’s head where he sleeps every night. Leroy is gone forever, and Ollie is home.

—Michele Onorato, executive director
The Cat’s Meow
Anacortes, Washington

Perry came to us from a “sanctuary” that was raided and closed due to abuse and neglect. The big, handsome, black-and-white cat was absolutely terrified. Any change in his routine, even shifting the position of his litter box, would cause panic; every noise or sudden movement made him cringe. Though the door was left open so he could roam our intake room, he was too afraid to step out of his cage. A group of dedicated volunteers (known as Kitty Buddies) worked with Perry to help him become more confident and sociable. Within a few months, he was roaming the shelter and greeting visitors. He remembered how to play, and he’d come running when we called his name! He became a favorite of the volunteers and staff. And just last month, he picked his new family and went to his forever home, where he quickly settled into his new life.

—Joyce Fetterman, Kitty Buddy coordinator
(volunteer)
Good Mews Animal Foundation
Marietta, Georgia

We received a call about a little gray dog who strayed up to a farm site. Filthy, matted, and stinky, she was promptly taken in for much-needed vet care. After shaving down to the skin, she was loaded with tick bites, and was in heat too. What looked like a mini-sheepdog turned out to be a lovely young white schnauzer/poodle mix. She now runs and
plays daily at a prestigious dog park in the Twin Cities, lives a spoiled indoor life, and is the love of her new parents’ life!
—Wendy Munsterman, adoption coordinator
Humane Society of Swift County
Benson, Minnesota

Someone dumped a young female rottweiler in the industrial area of Sunland, Calif., in heat, grossly underweight, and scared. She was so frightened of people that she would flatten herself in the corner when you went in to feed her or clean her kennel. After a several weeks, “Sunny” was doing really well. She was wagging and willing to approach. But Beverly [Berger, president of Rottweiler Rescue of Los Angeles] and I both knew she wasn’t adoptable, due to her extreme fear of strangers and unknown dogs. A previous adopter, Maureen, had a rottweiler from us who had passed away, and she was ready to adopt another. Walking by Sunny’s kennel she asked, “Who’s this?” I replied, “No, not that one.” But Maureen is not put off that easily, and she politely insisted. Sunny practically climbed into Maureen’s lap. She walked nicely on the leash. She sat quietly and attentively at Maureen’s side. And that was it for Maureen. With tears in her eyes she announced, “This is the one I want.” So Sunny was spayed, vaccinated, microchipped, bathed, and adopted. A few months later, Sunny, now named Ella June, is a new dog! She loves her three housemate kittens, plays with other dogs, and adores the grandchildren and accompanying Maureen to the stable. Our shy, timid, wilted flower has turned into a bright, vivacious, outgoing young woman of a dog.
—Jill Miller, treasurer/co-founder
Rottweiler Rescue of Los Angeles
Pacific Palisades, California

Creamsicle, a white, unneutered male cat with orange patches, lived outdoors in my neighborhood for the entire winter. I would feed him every night in the parking lot. He acted completely feral and would never approach the food until I left. I could not get anywhere near him. He was covered in grease and dirt. Last spring I encountered him a block from the parking lot sunning himself and rubbing against a tree. I reached down and pet him. Turns out he was completely friendly, extremely affectionate. He was probably badly traumatized when he was abandoned by his previous owners, and then trust burst through again. He is now in a new home. He is clean, neutered and, best of all, with people he can trust forever.
—Kathleen Goward, treasurer
A Tale at a Time Inc.
Brooklyn, New York

Garland was an anxious and scared dog who was not adopted from the shelter for almost two years. She showed aggression toward other dogs, but she was always wonderful with people. A couple saw her online and couldn’t bear the thought of her staying at the shelter any longer. She went into their home and was renamed Dagny for a new start. She would become a dog-loving, water-splashing, fun-hunting pooch in just a matter of months. She went from fearful and despondent to confident and contented much faster than we expected. She is a much-loved friend and family member.
—Laura McKelvey, animal care specialist
PAWS Atlanta
Decatur, Georgia

Congratulations to Laura McKelvey, whose submission was selected in a random drawing from those published in this issue. Her organization, PAWS Atlanta, will receive a free coffee break: a $50 gift certificate to a local coffee shop. “Bone” appétit!

Check out the latest Coffee Break question and submit your responses (150 words or less) at animalsheltering.org/coffebreak or send them to Editor, Animal Sheltering/HSUS, 2100 L St. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Your answer may be printed in a future issue of Animal Sheltering. If your response is chosen for publication, you will be entered into a drawing to win a free coffee break (valued at $50) for your organization. Responses may be edited for length or clarity; no donation or purchase is necessary to win. See animalsheltering.org for contest rules, or send an e-mail or letter to the above addresses to request a printed copy.