

Finding Forever Families for Golden Retrievers: A Special Interview With Jessie Pickard

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, I am Dr. Karen Becker, and Jessie Pickard has been nominated for an Animal Game Changer Award. And we're so happy and honored that Jessie has joined us this morning as a special guest to talk about all of the amazing work that she's doing. So, Jessie, welcome and congratulations on your nomination.

Jessie Pickard:

Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

For people who don't know about the work that you're doing, if you could back us up and just walk us through a little bit about how you arrived at volunteering where you're at.

Jessie Pickard:

Okay. Growing up, we were always animal lovers. My mom started with Golden Retrievers, so they've always been very close to my heart. When I became an adult and went to college, I started volunteering for a Golden Retriever rescue in Oklahoma. And now that I'm here in Virginia, I've been with GRREAT, Golden Retriever Rescue, Education and Training, for about 25 years. I've been their adoption coordinator, I'm on the board, and I'm a foster home. So just from the get-go, I was always a dog lover, and now I'm a dog rescuer.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So beautiful. Did you move to Virginia and then found – we kind of tend to gravitate toward people in pods and energies who are similar to ours, were you able to just find this organization early on?

Jessie Pickard:

Yeah. So when I was in Oklahoma as a grad student, I adopted my very first Golden, Annie, from the rescue there. And I just fell in love with the mission and what they were doing, so I joined. And when I finished grad school and I came and got a job in Virginia, I looked up Golden Retriever rescues and found GRREAT, and they were actually in need of an adoption coordinator right away. So from that moment on, I was their adoption coordinator, and I've been with them ever since. It's a great organization. They've rescued more than 5,000 dogs over the course of the 25 years I've been with them. It just fit right in.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so as the adoption coordinator, Jessie, do people say, "Hey, there's a Golden in a shelter here," or is it more through – I'm sure it's all different backgrounds, so maybe people who pass away, older people maybe who need their dog placed. Are people calling you from all over the state when there's a Golden, or how does that work?

Jessie Pickard:

Right. So with GRREAT, we get about 80% of our dogs from owner give-ups. People who call us that can no longer care for them or a relative has passed away and nobody in the family can take the dog. New baby, new husband, new spouse, whatever doesn't want the dog. We've had some crazy reasons too, but they'll call GRREAT, our foster home and intake coordinator will get the process started. When we bring the dog into GRREAT, they go to a foster home for a minimum amount of time where we get them checked out by the vet. We get them checked out for behavior. We address anything we see.

Jessie Pickard:

And then I come in as the adoption coordinator. In the meantime, I'm interviewing applications, doing home visits, getting all that straight because our job in the rescue is to make the best match possible. So we learn everything we can about the dog in the foster home, and we learn everything that we can about our applicants through reference checks and home visits. And then we try to put them together because we want the dog's next match to be the forever one. They've already been through whatever they've been through, and we want to make sure this next one is the right one. So it's not a fast process with GRREAT, but it's as thorough as we can make it, and we have a really high success rate.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And Jessie, do you have a waiting list? Let's say someone who would be interested in an older dog, or maybe a special-needs Golden. Do you have people that have made themselves available, filled out the application and are waiting for that perfect Golden to come along?

Jessie Pickard:

We do. We actually have a whole lot more applications than we have Golden's available. As you know, this COVID time period has been very strange for everybody. So many people are home now and they have the time. That's the biggest reason to give up a dog, is no time. So they're home now. They have the time. People have adopted dogs in greater numbers than they ever have before. And they're also applying in greater numbers than they ever have before. So lots of people want to adopt, and there aren't very many dogs available at this time.

Jessie Pickard:

But one of the things I like about GRREAT is our mission is to never say no to a dog because of age or medical issue. So we take in dogs no matter what their age, no matter what their medical crisis is, and we do everything we can to address it. And luckily we have foster homes that love this kind of dog. We have applicants who love this kind of dog. They love the ones that nobody else wants, the three-legged dogs, the blind dogs, the partially paralyzed dogs, the dogs that are in hospice care that are going to pass away from cancer pretty soon that we just do our best to make comfortable. So we have foster homes and we have applicants who – that's their mission.

So, when they come to a rescue, it's not that they want a dog in their house. They want to be there for a dog, you know the difference? They're there for the dog not because they want a dog to complete their family. Does that make sense? Did I would say that correctly?

Dr. Karen Becker:

And [inaudible 00:05:25] so beautiful about this system is that I think that in-home foster care, in this specialized niche where you've got these overwhelmingly committed foster homes and people willing to figure out maybe what needs to be worked on, you've got the whole system set up for the dogs to be successful regardless of what they came out of, and that's a really beautiful thing. Do we have a guest there?

Jessie Pickard:

Well, Stevie just walked through, but this is Molly. Molly came to the rescue as a 3-year-old. She was born paralyzed from her waist back and she wasn't given the best prognosis. They tried surgery, it didn't work. So Molly wears a harness and a diaper. She was originally with another rescue, but young Golden retrievers are very high-energy, they're very happy, they're very vivacious. And at the time, she was the same as any other Golden. She just happened to be in a harness and a diaper. The people who originally started fostering her were expecting kind of a senior hospice care dog, and that wasn't Molly. So luckily when she was 3 years old, she made it to GRREAT, made it to my home as a foster.

Jessie Pickard:

What's great about Molly is that she's no different than any other dog we've ever fostered. She just happens to have a different kind of mobility, and we work with that. We've learned so much. We've worked with so many experts in the field. One of the things I love about fostering a dog like Molly, is that I get to work with an animal chiropractor. I get to work with a-

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, [inaudible 00:07:15].

Jessie Pickard:

What's up Molly girl? What are you doing?

Jessie Pickard:

I get to work with acupuncturists, cold laser therapists. I get to do ozone therapy with her, water therapy with her, she loves swimming, she loves living. She is 10 years old now, and we've had the best journey. One of the things I like about this rescue is that they have a long-term foster program. And what that means is that they consider that no one would want to adopt a dog like Molly, but they have a foster home like us that will take care of her for the rest of their lives. So she's still a great dog. She's considered a foster dog, but she gets to live out her life here and GRREAT maintains her therapeutic massage, her acupuncture, her cold laser, everything that's going to keep her comfortable and happy and living life the way she wants to live it. So that's one of the reasons I really love working with this organization is that it's all about quality and fun and letting a Golden be a Golden for as long as possible.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful. And the cool thing about her is that she's educating everyone around her while she's living her best life. She's educating everyone around her, especially people who may not be familiar with the fact that dogs born maybe not physically perfect, their quality of life is exceptional, and they can have very fulfilled lives. And I think that those types of ambassadors are really important. And then, talk to me about who this is?

Jessie Pickard:

So this is Stevie, hey Stevie girl, what's you doing?

Dr. Karen Becker:

Hi, honey. And Steve's blind?

Jessie Pickard:

Stevie is blind. She was born blind. Stevie was actually born and diagnosed with chondrodystrophic dwarfism. And she was given six months to live. So we knew when we got her that we were just going to try to keep her happy as a puppy and not do too much with her, but luckily we were working with a trainer at the time who got very angry with us and said, "No, you're not. You're going to get her in puppy class. She is going to learn how to be a good canine citizen. She's going to be exposed to as much as you can expose her to for as long as you can."

Jessie Pickard:

And we did that. We got her in puppy class. We took her swimming. We took her to public events. And here she is, she is now 12 years old. Yes, we addressed her kidney disease, she was born in kidney failure. We address that with diet, with lots of supplements, with acupuncture. We did it as naturally as we could. And now she got to join the Morris [Animal] Foundation's Golden Oldies study because she's 12 years old. And even with everything else she has going on, there's no cancer.

Jessie Pickard:

So both Stevie and Molly come to events with us. They meet people, they meet the public, they meet children. Molly has her own Facebook page. These dogs have been so incredible both to us personally, because we get to take care of them and be their stewards. But to people at large. It's so important to see that dogs like this don't need to be written off. They can live really rich, full lives. You just have to be there for them. You just have to explore what your options are. Through fostering these two, I have met so many people who just see that there's a challenge and we can figure out how to do this, we can figure out how to work with it, we can find ways to help them be happy and live great lives. Sorry.

Jessie Pickard:

It's been such a privilege to take care of dogs that have special needs. It's been a privilege to figure out what's going to work for them, and what's going to see them through and how many of them can be adopted and have a family of their own. I just love that we don't give up on them. That's what's the most important thing about working with this organization. We fundraise all the

time to make sure that we never have to say no. That we always have resources to go and find orthotics for Molly, who's paralyzed or special treatments for Stevie, who's blind and in kidney failure, special diets, anything we can do. There are resources out there. There are more resources out there now than there ever was before. I think 30 years ago, these dogs might've been let go, put down, euthanized, but that doesn't have to be. And they can live happy, comfortable lives. Sorry.

Dr. Karen Becker:

They also are wildly happy in the bodies that they have, that maybe as humans, we would say things like, "They're not quite perfect." They are perfect. And they're happily perfect with everything that they've known from birth and they're A-okay in the bodies that they have. And I think us trying to keep them as comfortable as possible is also role-modeling for everyone watching. The dogs in your organization interact with the people, interacting with the public, you're bringing out a tremendous amount of awareness to the fact that all dogs can have an exceptional quality of life if we can do our parts as their stewards in providing that to them. And your organization's doing that. Lovely-

Jessie Pickard:

I would agree wholeheartedly with that. They live very, very full, happy lives, and they're exposed to as much as we can expose them to, the beach, swimming, hiking, playing games, meeting people, being stewards, just showing everybody that you can live this happy life and a full life, no matter what your challenges are.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Really good. So I can only imagine, Jessie, that you love a million things about your volunteer position, but what's the thing that gets you up in the morning that just makes you overwhelmingly happy about your position?

Jessie Pickard:

I love being a piece in the chain. I love having a Golden come in, a dog come in, that needs a second chance. I love being a part of giving them that chance. I love figuring out what I can do to address what's medical going on, what's behavior going on, what they need to turn themselves, to get themselves into a position where a forever family is going to love them. I love bringing them in, doing the best I can, and then letting them go to a family that's going to love them for the rest of their lives. Just being a part of that story from beginning to end is why I get up and I do this every day.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that's really good. And that has to be incredibly fulfilling for you to see them in their forever homes and knowing that you were a part of thousands of those dogs' journeys is incredible. And Jessie, if there was one thing that maybe people who haven't done what you've done, if there's one thing that you would want the world to know, what would it be?

Jessie Pickard:

I think people get a little nervous about the entire picture. And I think what they need to do is concentrate on what you can do right here and now. The things I do with my dogs, I often tell people it didn't start out that way. It starts out small and it gets bigger and bigger and finally you have this whole routine that you do when, if you come in from out of the blue, it's very intimidating. But what I think I would say, is stop thinking about it, just do. Just do something. Do something small and let it grow. Just take a step, just volunteer a little, do a temporary foster, see how that goes. Meet a whole lot of different kinds of dogs. Start talking to a whole lot of different kinds of people, get ideas. But honestly, my bottom line is just do, just be present, show up and do something. Do something and let it grow and then do something more and then do something more, and you'll find pretty soon you've got it. And you've got some confidence and you're helping dogs that you never thought you could.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Really good. That's fantastic advice. Little tiny steps aren't nearly as overwhelming, and you don't have to do the big picture. You can do one tiny step and that's a powerful contributing factor. If everyone did a little bit, we'd be much farther along. It's really good advice. Jessie, if people wanted to learn more about this organization or maybe how to follow or when dogs come in, if they're interested in learning more or seeing more about the organization, where do people go?

Jessie Pickard:

The website is www.GRREAT.org. And that's an acronym of our full name, Golden Retriever Rescue, Education and Training. We also have a Facebook group. Molly has her own Facebook group, which you can get to from the website or from GRREAT's Facebook. Our Facebook group is mostly for fun and information and that kind of thing. But if you're interested in volunteering, adopting anything like that, you would go to our website.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Beautiful. Well, congratulations. It's well-deserved. What a beautiful thing that you are doing. That you are deeply inspired and passionate about, it's obvious and evident. And it's really wonderful that Golden Retrievers have beautiful people in the world that are solely focused on giving them the very best quality of life. Jessie, thank you for everything.

Jessie Pickard:

Thank you very much. I really appreciate talking to you. And being nominated for this was very cool. So thank you.