

The Shadow at His Side

How a little
shadow came
into one person's
life — and made
everything
brighter

BY SARAH THORNTON

Shadow with
Ryan and
Charles





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ON'T LET HIS SIZE AND WOLFISH FEATURES fool you. Shadow is the very definition of gentle giant. He drops down onto his belly to get eye-to-eye with his Chihuahua chums, tactfully breaks up canine confrontations at the dog park and, although he's slowing down in his senior years, runs alongside younger dogs as they race — cheering them on with excited barks.

As much as Shadow loves his pooch playmates, however, he loves people more. The bigger the crowd, the better. He will make friends with anyone who approaches him and couldn't be happier being the center of attention. That makes him the perfect partner for his person, Ryan Lackey. "If I could be half as social as he is," Ryan says, "it would be so easy."

Since the day they met, Shadow has been Ryan's best friend and biggest supporter, helping him through the difficult times and, ultimately, transforming his life. Because just like a shadow would be, he's always by Ryan's side.

DOG BROTHERS MEET HUMAN BROTHERS

Ten years ago, staff at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary received an urgent plea for help when a clinical therapist reached out on behalf of a client in distress. The man had recently been in a car accident and had lost his job, and his adult dogs and their puppies were keeping him up at night. When he confessed that he was planning to shoot them, the therapist sought to take immediate action and asked the client's permission to take steps to give the dogs a second chance for safe, loving homes. The man agreed and the call to Best Friends was made. Sadly, the man passed away shortly after — having agreed to do the right thing for the dogs before he died.

When Sanctuary staff arrived to assess the situation, there were 7 adult dogs and 10 puppies living in a fenced-in yard. They were outgoing and friendly, and jumped up to greet them, with tails wagging. The staff recognized that once the dogs were spayed or neutered, it wouldn't take long to find new homes for them. While Best Friends began reaching out to other rescue organizations for help



Shadow and his siblings arrived at the Sanctuary as puppies in 2013.

with finding families, the puppies came to the Sanctuary, where (no surprise) adoptions were swift.

One of those sweet little dogs was Ashoka. When Ryan's mother saw the chubby malamute with the one floppy ear, she knew he was the puppy for Ryan's brother, who had just lost his beloved husky to cancer. Soon, Ashoka was on a flight to Denver, where he quickly became a cherished member of the family.

Even as they welcomed Ashoka into their home, the Lackeys couldn't help but think about the rest of the puppies. They frequently checked back to see who among his siblings had been whisked away to new lives. "We saw the dogs one by one being picked up," recalls Charles Lackey, Ryan's father. "And then there was finally one left, and my wife said, 'Why don't you call and see?'" So they did.

That one remaining dog was Shadow, who not only would be reunited with his brother, he'd get a whole new family to love him. From the beginning, while Ashoka was Ryan's brother's dog, Shadow was undeniably Ryan's.

Sure, the family had had other dogs as Ryan and his brother were growing up, but, as Ryan says, "This was totally different." Shadow became Ryan's closest confidant. With his calm yet outgoing disposition, he was the ideal companion. "I love the way he howls and tries to communicate," Ryan says. "He looks around like he really understands what's going on, and he wants to be part of everything. He really likes to be part of the family."

A COMFORTING PRESENCE

Shadow is the perfect pal to have when things get tough, which they did at times. "It's made a big difference to my life to have Shadow around," Ryan explains. "I had some mental health problems. But also — at the same time — I had essential tremors. And they got bad."

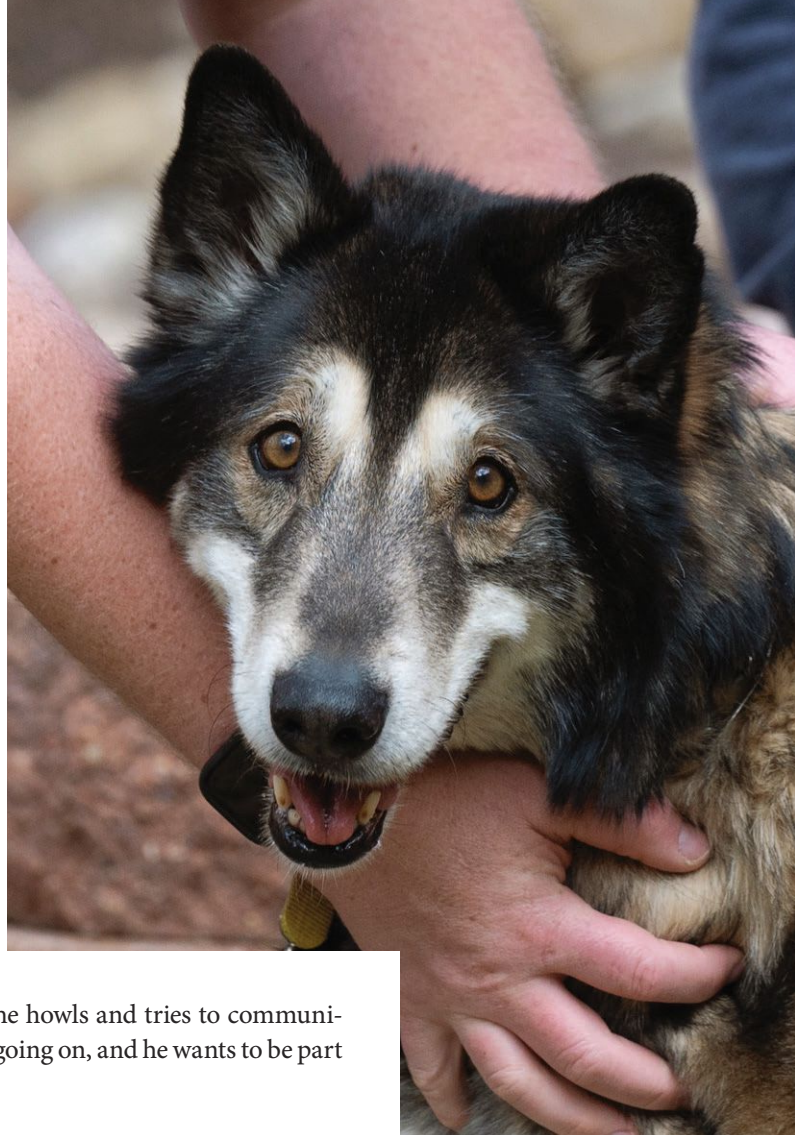
When it was a struggle for Ryan just to get out of bed, Shadow would be a reassuring presence, offering an oversized paw. Shadow would nuzzle him to make sure his best friend was OK, and he always seemed to know how to brighten things up with a comforting cuddle or an extra bit of silliness.

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says Ryan, "and there was no judgment in the way he looked at me. He just wanted to be there for me."

Shadow's support in those days was immeasurable. His presence alone created a sense of security and comfort that was very needed; he had Ryan's back, no matter what. So, it was only natural to have him officially registered as an emotional support service dog, solidifying his role as Ryan's most dependable ally, as well as allowing Shadow to really embody his name, following Ryan to more places outside of their home.

In their small community, everyone already knew Shadow. He was the beloved and benevolent king of the dog park. But when Shadow was welcomed into the local Walmart, now able to join Ryan



Shadow on a recent visit to the Sanctuary



on shopping trips to help ease any anxiety he might feel from the outing and the crowds, Shadow met a slew of new people, spreading that infectious joy in checkout lines.

While Ryan has since received neural implant stimulators to help correct the tremors, Shadow continues to be his anchor, helping him regulate his emotional states and take on the wider world. Watching Shadow interact with people so blissfully, Ryan says, has helped him do the same. Shadow is like an icebreaker, the extrovert guiding his friend through otherwise overwhelming situations. “I think he’s taught me a lot about being happy,” Ryan says. “He just has a way of looking at the world that’s really special.”

SNOW AND ICE CREAM

In light of all the comfort that Shadow provides, Ryan and his family are making sure to give it right back — especially now, in his golden years. What Shadow wants, Shadow gets (within reason, of course). Often, that seems to involve cold things.

“He does love snow,” Charles says with a laugh, explaining how prone to the white powdery stuff their high-altitude home in the Rocky Mountains can be. “He’ll wake me up at 4:30 in the morning and want to go out. So, I come downstairs, make a cup of coffee, sit there and watch TV, and pretty soon I’m looking around — he’s not back in — and I look outside and he’s in the backyard just lying in the snow, looking through the fence at the darkness.”

Shadow has also become a little particular at mealtimes, requiring his dessert before the main course, in the form of a dollop of ice cream. Given that only the finest frozen treats will do, Shadow has earned himself the nickname Häagen-Dogz. “He’s been so good to us, we just can’t tell him no,” Ryan says.

They still go on hikes, so Shadow is able to take in new sights and smells and sounds. And on road trips, he rides around with his head perched on Ryan’s shoulder to enjoy the view. Recently, one such excursion took the family back to the Sanctuary, where their story began. Sadly, not everyone who’d

had a part in this beautiful tale could be there. After a long and happy life, Ashoka had already passed away. And Ryan’s mother remained at home, as she underwent cancer treatment. So, it was up to Ryan and Charles to experience the canyon the pups had once called a home-between-homes, and report back.

Meanwhile, standing outside Dogtown headquarters, Shadow greeted staff and volunteers with soft nuzzles and lazy tail wags. Venturing up to Angels Landing, the canyon’s natural amphitheater, he rolled in the green grass and stretched out in the sun. It was a lovely homecoming for a dog whose life could have turned out very differently, were it

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“It’s been such a privilege to have Shadow in our lives. We could have ended up with any dog, and he changed everything, I think, for all of us,” Ryan explains, trying to put into words the 10 years’ worth of love that led them back to the Sanctuary. “I just wanted to say thank-you.” And we’re sure Shadow would say the same. 🐾

