

Brian Brehm Feature Series or Continuing Story W08

Homeless no more: A man, a dog and the bond that set them free

By Brian Brehm

The Winchester Star

WINCHESTER — This is the story of Scott and Harley and how they saved each other's lives.

Scott is a 51-year-old man whose physical and mental health problems contributed to him being homeless for six years.

Harley Girl is a 4-year-old dog who spent nearly two years on the streets before she was taken to the [SPCA of Winchester, Frederick and Clarke Counties](#).

In February 2020, Harley was adopted by the staff of [Winchester Rescue Mission](#) and brought to live in the nonprofit's homeless shelter at 435 N. Cameron St. That's where she met Scott, who had been staying there since 2017.

On Thursday, Scott and Harley walked out of the mission together and moved into a new apartment in Winchester. They are homeless no more, thanks to a very special bond between a man and a dog.

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Scott, who did not want his last name used, was not comfortable being interviewed, so he asked the staff of Winchester Rescue Mission to speak on his behalf.

"He's very, very private," Development Coordinator Vicki Culbreath said on Friday.

Prior to coming to the Rescue Mission, Scott had been in a nursing home for several years due to severe diabetes. When he had to leave, he had nowhere to go, so he went to the homeless shelter.

Two-and-a-half years later, at the start of 2020, Winchester Rescue Mission Administrator Lauren Clouse pitched the idea of adopting a dog as a companion for the men who stay at the shelter. Executive Director Brandan Thomas wasn't thrilled with the idea, but Clouse and Development Coordinator Vicki Culbreath started looking for a dog anyway.

On Feb. 3, 2020, Clouse and Culbreath met a 30-pound, mixed-breed dog at the SPCA at 111 Featherbed Lane. Her name was Girl and it was obvious she would be the perfect pet because, like the men at the Rescue Mission, she had been homeless herself.

For the first two years of her life, Girl had belonged to a homeless man who loved and cared for her. But in January 2020, cold weather forced the man to seek warmth from the [Winchester Area Temporary Thermal Shelter](#) program, a collaboration among local churches that provides free overnight accommodations during the winter. However, WATTS does not allow pets, so Girl's owner reluctantly surrendered her to the SPCA.

“The story, the whole thing — we thought, ‘Gosh, we’ve got to do this,’” Thomas said about the mission’s decision to adopt Girl. “I’m grateful they convinced me to go for it.”

Girl moved into the Winchester Rescue Mission on Feb. 4, 2020, and was an instant hit with the residents.

“Everybody fell in love with her. Everybody,” Thomas said.

Girl’s new owners gave her a new name, Harley, which was picked to reflect Thomas’ love of Harley-Davidson motorcycles. To respect her former name, they called her Harley Girl.

Harley formed a special bond with every single resident and staff member at the Rescue Mission. Culbreath said when she would come to work each day, Harley hustled down the hallway to greet her and get a treat.

“When she comes into an office, we immediately cheer up,” Culbreath said. “She lightens the mood for everybody around here.”

Thomas said Harley’s sweet disposition became invaluable once the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. Residents suddenly found themselves confined at the homeless shelter for months, but at least they had Harley to lift their spirits. She made the rounds every day to give everyone a kiss and some quality one-on-one time.

“This was the right place at the right time,” Thomas said. “We could not imagine how much she would mean to us.”

Harley loved everyone at the Rescue Mission, but the person to whom she was closest was Scott. He fed her and took walks with her, and she would sleep in his bed at night.

“For whatever reason, they took to each other,” Thomas said. “Those two really are inseparable.”

Which was somewhat of a surprise. According to Culbreath, when the mission first got Harley, Scott looked at her and said, “That is the ugliest dog ever.”

“He told me last week that he never thought he would have this love for her,” Culbreath said. “But she’s a one-of-a-kind dog.”

Their bond was so strong that Harley became sad whenever she wasn’t with Scott. That was especially obvious in January when Scott had to be hospitalized at [Winchester Medical Center](#) due to a COVID-19 infection that caused him to lapse into a diabetic coma. His condition was so severe doctors didn’t expect him to survive, Thomas said.

Meanwhile, Harley kept vigil at the mission and waited for Scott to return. At night, she slept in his empty bed.

Miraculously, Scott emerged from his coma and was taken off the ventilator that had been keeping him alive. After a lengthy hospital stay, he was healthy enough to go back to the mission and reunite with Harley.

“She knew she had to be real gentle with him,” Culbreath said. “She would leave his room long enough to go outside for short walks, but otherwise stayed with him in bed while he was recovering.”

Culbreath said Harley also helped Scott overcome his clinical depression. A doctor even completed paperwork to designate Harley as his emotional support animal.

“Harley got him out of bed, got him doing things,” Culbreath said. “I’m not sure Scott would be in such a good place had Harley not been through this journey with him the past few years.”

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Last month, Scott realized he was physically and mentally strong enough to leave the Rescue Mission after six years of residency. He secured an apartment in Winchester, then asked Culbreath, “Does Harley get to go with me?”

“We didn’t hesitate,” Culbreath said. “I’ve never seen him as happy than when he’s with Harley. And Harley loves him to death.”

On Thursday, Scott and Harley officially stopped being homeless when they moved into Scott’s new apartment.

“She has two dog beds in her new home, she took all of her possessions from here — which was a lot — and the neighbor has a dog,” Culbreath said. “She has a yard to play in with her new dog friend. She’s really happy.”

Scott’s apartment is within walking distance of the Rescue Mission, so Culbreath said she’ll be popping in for regular visits.

And Scott doesn’t have to worry about someone watching out for Harley if he winds up being hospitalized again.

“She can just come back and we’ll provide temporary shelter for her,” Culbreath said. “She’ll always be part of the mission, and we’ll always be her family.”

When Harley visits the mission, she’ll probably have a new canine friend to romp with.

“Lauren and I are already keeping our eyes open [for another dog],” Culbreath said with a smile. “We haven’t told Brandan yet.”

A man, a dog and the end of their fairy tale

By Brian Brehm

The Winchester Star

“There are no happy endings, just happy days, happy moments.” ~ Jonathan Tropper

WINCHESTER — May 12th was the happiest day of Scott Ashwood's life.

After six years of homelessness, preceded by five years of nursing home care, the 50-year-old had regained enough health and independence to move into his own apartment.

Best of all, he got to take his beloved dog with him. Scott and Harley Girl — a mixed-breed pup who spent about two years being homeless — developed a special bond after she was adopted by the [Winchester Rescue Mission](#) in February 2020 and moved into the nonprofit's homeless shelter at 435 N. Cameron St.

It was inspiring, heartwarming, the stuff of fairy tales.

Unfortunately, the fairy tale came to a tragic end.

On Sept. 1, Scott was found dead in his National Avenue apartment. It is believed he passed away about three days prior, leaving 4-year-old Harley alone, afraid and trapped.

"Endings are the saddest part, so just give me a happy middle and a very happy start." ~ Shel Silverstein

On the morning of Sept. 1, Winchester Rescue Mission Executive Director Brandan Thomas got a call informing him that Scott had missed a court appearance regarding child support payments.

"We were listed as his emergency contact," Brandan said. "We immediately assumed something not great."

That's because Scott was severely diabetic. In January, he tested positive for COVID-19 and his body went into overdrive trying to fight the virus, but he had been so weakened by diabetes that he instead lapsed into a coma for several weeks. Brandan said it was a miracle he survived.

Once Scott emerged from the coma, his health improved and, with Harley by his side, he gained control of the depression that had emotionally crippled him for years.

By May 12, Scott was well enough to move out of the mission and into his own apartment. Since he had formed such a solid bond with the dog the mission had adopted from the [SPCA of Winchester, Frederick and Clarke Counties](#) two years earlier, he was allowed to take Harley with him.

Brandan connected Scott with the [permanent supportive housing](#) program administered by [Northwestern Community Services](#) of Front Royal. According to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#), permanent supportive housing is an initiative that helps chronically homeless people move into affordable housing and receive ongoing support services to help them find work and stay healthy.

"He was so happy," said Winchester Rescue Mission Development Coordinator Vicki Culbreath. "It was the first time in 11 years he had his own place. ... He finally saw the future he could have."

When Brandan learned that Scott had missed court, he drove to his apartment and knocked on the door.

"I heard the dog inside but he wasn't responding," Brandan said.

He then went to the Timbrook Public Safety Center, located about four blocks away from Scott's apartment, and asked the Winchester Police Department to conduct a wellness check.

"As soon as I got back here, I got a text from [Winchester Police] Chief [John] Piper telling me that it didn't look good," Brandan said.

Realizing that something serious had occurred, Brandan drove back to Scott's apartment and, if necessary, bring Harley back to the mission. The shelter had become Harley's home away from home because Scott took her there whenever he had a medical appointment or anything else that took him away from the apartment for more than a few hours.

"He had an emergency about six weeks ago and had to go to the hospital," Vicki said. "The fire department knew Harley so they brought her to us."

Before Brandan could get to Scott's place, he received another text from the police department telling him Scott was dead.

Autopsy results are still pending, but officials are attributing his death to diabetes because they suspect Scott, once on his own and away from the staff and residents at the Winchester Rescue Mission, may not have been diligent with his diet and medication.

According to an [obituary](#) prepared by [Omps Funeral Home](#) in Winchester, Scott was a 1989 graduate of James Wood High School, a talented artist and a music and sports fan who was working at Valley Industrial Plastics Inc. in Frederick County at the time of his death.

He is survived by a daughter, Autumn Ashwood of Wardensville, West Virginia, as well as a brother, a sister, a niece and several great-nieces and great-nephews.

"Also surviving Scott is his beloved canine companion, Harley," the obituary states.

"You cannot bubble wrap and protect your heart from life, and why should you? It is meant to be used, and sometimes broken." ~ Nora McInerney

Scott's death left Harley distressed.

"She was pretty hungry and pretty thirsty when she got back [to the mission]," Vicki said.

"She was really struggling to walk because her paws were really irritated. ... The vet said she was probably trying to wake him up."

Harley was sad, lethargic and confused for the first few days, Vicki said, but she was comforted by the men staying at the mission. Her first night back, she curled up and slept in one of their beds.

A resident named Jerry, who has lived at the Winchester Rescue Mission for 20 years, was one of the first people Harley bonded with when she was adopted, and he was one of the first people she latched onto when she returned.

"He'll tell you he's a cat person, but he's been looking after her," Vicki said.

Harley also became Vicki's constant shadow, following her everywhere throughout the building during the workday. Vicki set up a doggie bed in her office so Harley can nap at her feet.

"She's very attached to me," Vicki said. "If I didn't have a dog with dementia at home, she'd be at my house right now."

"If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin." ~ Charles Darwin

It takes a lot to make Brandan Thomas angry, but he's absolutely furious about the absence of an assisted-living facility in Winchester for people like Scott who are transitioning from homelessness to independence.

"Some people need to be in a place with some level of care," he said. "The individual independent-living apartment is not the answer for everybody."

When a person is homeless for an extended period of time, they often must rely on others to help them address their basic, everyday needs. When that support system is gone and they have to do everything on their own, it can be a recipe for failure.

While the permanent supportive housing program available in the Northern Shenandoah Valley is valuable and necessary, Brandan said it doesn't do enough to help homeless individuals succeed in society. Scott, for example, had people who would check on him at his apartment every few days, but he didn't have a daily supportive presence that could have helped monitor his diet and ensure he took his medication as prescribed.

"This could have been completely avoided if he had been around people when he started getting ill," Brandan said.

While it's too late to save Scott, Brandan wants to ensure that no one else suffers the same fate. Advocating for a transitional housing facility in or near Winchester is something he plans on doing until it becomes a reality.

"There has to be a way to create transitional housing where there's some daily oversight, people that check in on a daily basis just to make sure they're doing OK," Brandan said. "How many people have to die before we stop and re-look at the way this whole thing works?"

"This is a modern fairytale. No happy endings, no wind in our sails, but I can't imagine a life without breathless moments." ~ Selena Gomez

Harley is back to her old self these days. While Brandan and Vicki were being interviewed at the mission earlier this week, the dog slept contentedly on the floor between them, snoring and passing gas so loudly that she eventually woke herself up.

"She's settled into her normal routine," Vicki said with a laugh.

If Harley's life was a fairy tale, chapter one would be her time on the streets, chapter two would be her adoption by the Winchester Rescue Mission and chapter three would be sharing an apartment with Scott.

Now it's time for chapter four.

A former mission resident who has been successfully living on his own for several months wants to take Harley home to live with him.

"When he found out what happened, he came in pretty quickly and she immediately went right up to him," Vicki said. "She was like, 'Oh, I know who you are.'"

"When he lived here, he and Scott would basically trade off the responsibility of taking care of Harley," Brandan added. "He's making sure that with his work schedule and finances, he can handle the responsibility of Harley. I think that would be a great landing spot for her. It would be her going with someone she loves and is really familiar with."

When asked why Harley can't just stay at the mission permanently, Brandan said it's because the shelter is about to go through some major changes. All the men living there will soon transfer to a new shelter being prepared in a vacant building at 2655 Valley Ave., and the North Cameron Street shelter will be converted to a women-only facility.

"I don't know if it's fair to her to have a constant change in environment, what we do, how we do it," Brandan said about Harley. "We want what's best for her and it might not be here."

"I think she's going to be here for a while," Vicki added. "This is always going to be home for her. She's very well loved."