

# Dog gone, dog found: Alaskan sled dog moves to Strasburg and takes off running

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By Laura Ruby

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As it turns out, Pistol is terrified of gunshots.

The Alaskan husky has had quite an adventurous few weeks, which started with a long airplane ride from her former home in Alaska to Virginia, involved the introduction of indoor living with a Strasburg family, and then the sound of distant gunfire that sent her running for the hills, and the river, and the roads around Shenandoah County.

After seven days missing, and untold miles covered, Pistol is now back home in Strasburg where she is recovering from her epic journey.

Born and raised in Eagle, Alaska, the petite black 8-year-old is a retired sled dog, having worked on guided expeditions for Bush Alaska Expeditions from the time she was old and strong enough. It was there that she crossed paths with Deb Cawthorn of Strasburg.

Cawthorn, who is retired from the U.S. Coast Guard, has been working as an expedition guide for the company for several seasons.

“I was always really into huskies. I used to follow the Iditarod [annual 1,000-mile trail sled dog race]. We got a couple of huskies when I knew I wasn’t going back to a ship, and then we got stationed in Kodiak, Alaska,” said Cawthorn, about her and her husband Mark, who is also retired from active duty with the Coast Guard. “I decided I was not going to leave Alaska until I did a real deal dog mushing trip.”

For her maiden voyage, she selected Bush Alaska Expeditions, whose owners have experience in the Iditarod. After a couple of trips as a client, Cawthorn went a third time in 2015 after she retired from the Coast Guard and convinced the owners to give her — a woman from the East Coast — a shot at leading expeditions.

“I had to kind of prove myself,” she said of her role as leader of multi-day trips through the remote Alaska wilderness where there are no paths, no running water, and no electricity. “We would go so far out, and you can only carry so much food in your dog sled, that we’d have to have airdrops of food. We did probably 400 to 500 miles in 12 days on a trip. It was just amazing.”

Working for a few months each winter in Alaska gave Cawthorn time to get to know the 55 sled dogs used by the company. And family and friends started to come up to share in the adventure.

One of those friends, Denise Lawson of Springfield, bonded with one of the dogs when she visited for an expedition, Cawthorn said, adding that sled dogs are typically rehomed after they retire. Lawson dove into the idea of rehoming the hardworking dogs, and created an organization called Black Bear Sled Dogs to do just that.

“Denise writes children's books about Black Bear, who is the first dog that she adopted,” Cawthorn said, noting books like “Black Bear Goes to Washington” and “Black Bear Saves Christmas” are available for purchase with the proceeds going toward veterinary expenses

and other costs associated with rehoming. Lawson has rehomed more than 20 dogs since starting the organization, Cawthorn said.

And one of those dogs is Pistol, with whom Cawthorn's daughter, Leah, fell in love during a trip to Alaska. "She was on the waitlist to adopt Pistol for three years," Cawthorn said, noting that guests connect with dogs during their tours and ask to be placed on the list for adoption when it's time for the dog to retire.

And so at the end of March, Pistol arrived in the Deer Rapids neighborhood outside Strasburg with Cawthorn, where she was intended to spend some time adjusting to life in Virginia. She was adapting well, learning to walk on stairs and spend more time indoors, until April 4 when she was spooked by the sound of gunfire. Pistol was able to push open a gate and then she was gone.

"She went, almost instantly, into run mode," Cawthorn said.

Running was quite literally Pistol's job, and she was good at it.

"Pistol has always been very shy, very skittish. And she is notoriously a runner," Cawthorn said. "She is like a running machine. But hooking up, and unhooking, if you're not holding on to her, she will take off and hide. And she, one time actually, ran all the way from one of our cabins 25 miles away. She got loose and she ran home."

Knowing how Pistol could cover ground, Cawthorn immediately took to Facebook to seek the community's help. Very quickly, neighbors started commenting with sightings, and Cawthorn saw her a few times that first morning. Later sightings would come in from farther out, from U.S. Route 11 and Fisher's Hill to John Marshall Highway. With Pistol still missing that evening, Cawthorn recruited friends to help her search, later learning that it was a wrong move.

After speaking with Carmen Brothers, a professional pet tracker based in Stephens City, Cawthorn learned that in her initial panic to find Pistol, she had made a few mistakes — calling the dog's name, having friends help look in the woods surrounding her home, and using an all-terrain vehicle in the search.

Following Brothers' advice, she refocused her efforts, placing a scent item in a baggie for Brothers' tracking dogs to use when they were available that Saturday. After some struggles that morning, the tracker dogs found the trail that afternoon.

"We were hitting tracks and it was amazing to see how they worked. The [tracker] dogs are not going to lead you right to your dog. They're going to lead you to the area to focus on. So now we had that area, which was a 25-mile radius at that point," she said.

Having narrowed down the search area, Cawthorn focused along Battlefield, Junction, and Back roads, where she posted flyers, spoke to residents, and drove around at night looking for Pistol, with the knowledge that the dog was likely traveling at night and hunkering down during the daytime heat that week. She tried a few times cooking meat on an outdoor grill in an effort to lure Pistol.

"It was just this cat and mouse game. It was crazy," Cawthorn said, noting that Pistol was spotted near the West Virginia line and may have covered 100 miles in her wandering.

Finally that weekend, Leah Cawthorn and her boyfriend Seth Newman saw Pistol on Mount Hebron Road. Though she took off again, the sighting confirmed for the family that Pistol was still alive and that they were looking in the right area. A few more sightings helped shrink the search area to a couple of miles, Cawthorn said, noting that she put up wildlife cameras and set a trap for Pistol to no avail.

Finally, on April 11, she caught a break after Pistol was spotted resting in a yard on Waverly Drive — 12 miles from home, having crossed the Shenandoah River, U.S. Route 11 and Interstate 81.

Ever so carefully, Cawthorn approached. Moving slowly and loaded with hot dogs and other tasty treats, she laid down on the ground and rolled her way toward Pistol, talking softly and gently. Eventually, Pistol, looking thin and exhausted, stood and started eating. After about 30 minutes, Pistol was close enough for Cawthorn could get her hands on her. And then she held on.

“She just walked right with me to the car and got in the car. She ate a whole pack of hot dogs,” said Cawthorn. “It was such a blessing, just such a relief. It had been such a stressful week.”

Noticeably limping, Pistol has been resting at home, recovering from wounds on her paws from running on pavement. She'll be visiting Leah Cawthorn in the coming days to begin to get acclimated to her adoptive home. And she is now outfitted with a GPS tracker.

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## **“It can be a superpower”: Couple revels in full spectrum experience at Shenandoah Epic adventure race**

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By Laura Ruby

The Northern Virginia Daily

Many of us watch endurance races on television, from the comfort of the couch, and think, “I could do that.” To put down the remote and actually take on the challenge in real life requires a serious commitment.

But that’s exactly what Rae Freeman and her husband, Tim Clinton, did. In April 15, they’ll return for the third time — and their seventh race — to the annual Shenandoah Epic, a 24-hour trekking, biking, and paddling adventure held in Warren County by Front Royal-based Adventure Enablers.

Freeman, an avid exercise enthusiast, and Clinton, who grew up enamored of the great outdoors, brought skills to the pursuit, but leaping into the world of adventure racing as first timers is a challenge for everyone. Shortly after they started racing, Freeman was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which opened up a whole new level of understanding, compassion, and opportunity for growth for the couple.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurological disorder that causes issues with communication, social, verbal, and motor skills, according to the Autism Society. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that ASD affects more than 5.4 million adults in the United States. In 2021, one in 44 US children were diagnosed with ASD. ASD presents differently in everyone, with varying degrees of severity.

“Tim and Rae have done a few of our events, and it is hard to imagine that on top of getting through the physical and emotional aspects of a race like the Epic, to also overcome things that come along with autism is a pretty spectacular feat,” said Mark Harris, race director for Adventure Enablers. “In some ways, I think that represents what a challenge of this nature, or any challenge can do. Challenging and pushing yourself to your limits, helps you tackle other aspects of your life that sometimes seem overwhelming or impossible.”

When the couple began their adventure racing journey — before Freeman’s diagnosis — they were aware of many concerns she had and how they affected their training and competition.

Like many people on the autism spectrum, Freeman has many sensitivities to things like light, sound, heat, cold, and taste. “For adventure racing, these aren't things that are ideal. For her, racing on the spectrum, it’s like she's hurdling while everyone else is running around the track,” Clinton said.

Freeman has learned to adapt.

“I’ve come up with a lot of tricks to make adventure racing friendly for people that have neurological things that affect them differently,” she said.

“The last race we did in North Carolina, we were fit and ready to kind of run through the night, but we weren't able to do a lot of it because the lighting system we had was making her nauseous,” Clinton said, adding that they are constantly tweaking gear to figure out what works best.

“People on the spectrum tend to fall a lot. They’re a little klutzy,” Clinton said, recalling the time Freeman fell right at the beginning of a race, while running on flat ground, and bloodied her knees and hands.

“I get really excited and I don’t pay attention and that results in falling if I’m not careful,” she added.

She’s also made adjustments in mountain biking.

“In mountain biking, you have to learn to relax during the descent. The bike is bouncing. It took so much courage for her” to adjust to that challenging stimuli. “We posted a lot of videos of training where Rae was just falling for no reason,” Clinton said, laughingly noting that a race director once pulled them aside to check in after having seen the videos.

Freeman also came to the sport with a lot of phobias. She was afraid of water, afraid of the dark, afraid of sounds in the woods. She also hated the idea of drinking “outside water,” she said, noting that for their first Shenandoah Epic she carried 15 pounds of water to avoid having to do so because her sense of taste is so refined. Now, she says, “I’ve come to appreciate fresh, spring water.”

“They say in adventure racing you pack your fears,” Clinton said, explaining that in the early days the team carried so much “unnecessary gear” as they learned how to navigate the races and Freeman’s specific needs.

Freeman’s diagnosis, which she suspected for several years but only received officially a year or so ago, has been a liberating one for the couple in many ways.

“I feel like now I have the owner’s manual” for how to communicate with Freeman, Clinton said. “It’s such a paradigm shift, for me to not get offended or get hurt when she says things that would be neurotypically hurtful. It’s a process. But I think it has helped us both have language about it and have a roadmap for how we can understand each other that we didn't have before.”

Freeman added, “I spent my whole life trying to figure out who I am and why I am the way I am. I spent a lot of time figuring out workarounds if I didn’t know how to do things neurotypical people did. It has helped me be able to identify precisely what the issue is. Like I have a hard time regulating my emotions. I thought I was always mad, but it wasn’t that. I was overstimulated and my response was anger partly because I didn’t understand what

was happening in my own body. The diagnosis has given me tools. I can communicate. I can explain.”

And they are developing those communication skills under the difficult circumstances of adventure racing. Realizing that they have different forms of communication, the couple can appreciate what each other brings to the marriage – and to the race. Clinton is more comfortable socializing with other participants and handles the administrative part of their adventures. Freeman is direct in her communication, not mincing words when she tells her husband he should hydrate or eat or change his shirt.

Freeman and Clinton say they are grateful to be navigating the challenges of adventure racing with such a supportive community.

“In my life I feel like I have a lot of obstacles that make my life more challenging. There’s nothing in life more challenging than adventure racing,” said Freeman. “My mind can do more than I thought. I’m less afraid of the dark. I prefer trails to street racing now. I’ve shifted my perspective about where I feel safe. The community is so welcoming and non-judgmental.”

Freeman and Clinton particularly love the Epic, praising Harris and his wife and business partner, Margo, for always putting together a race that is well organized and challenging for all levels of competitors.

Details like clearly marking private property so that racers don’t wander into unsafe situations are appreciated, they said, adding that though the race draws loads of people, the Harrises have a way of connecting with everyone.

“Mark checks on everyone. I feel like he knows me and I don’t have to mask and I can just have a good time,” Freeman said.

Although the upcoming Shenandoah Epic is sold out, Adventure Enablers is offering two nearby races this year. The Shenanduro mountain bike race will be held out of Shenandoah River State Park in May and the inaugural Almost Heaven 24-hour adventure race will be held in Davis, W.Va., in October, Harris said. Spots are still available and details about the races can be found at [www.adventureenablers.com](http://www.adventureenablers.com).

Residents of Washington, D.C., the couple have four children. Clinton is a partner in his law firm, Clinton and Peed, and Freeman is a classically trained actress currently working on a writing project while juggling an active toddler. Married for 22 years, adventure racing has given them quality time together, a way to focus their training and exercise regimen, and a way to raise awareness of ASD.

“It’s nice that we have a family that’s willing to talk about it and make discoveries together,” Freeman said. “Growing up I was very alone. One of the reasons I talk about it is so people can realize that they’re not alone. It can be a superpower.”

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## **Missing Strasburg man is back thanks to one woman's kindness**

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By Laura Ruby

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Ray Peacemaker is home.

After a week-long search by his family and law enforcement, Peacemaker, 76, of Strasburg, found his way home Friday, much to the joy of the community that loves him. Peacemaker and his daughter, Lesley Lewis of Winchester, are still recovering from the horrifying situation – a series of bad luck, unfortunate events, and the indifference of strangers that left him stranded and alone.

Peacemaker left his Massanutten Manor apartment on Friday, May 26, and traveled to a Bedford, Pennsylvania, speedway where he spent time with friends at the races. The trouble began when he detoured from his usual route home around Hancock, Maryland, because of a traffic backup. He intended to come south from Hagerstown, Maryland, but hit another traffic jam there and continued east with the idea that he'd go southwest through Berryville. Peacemaker missed that turn.

"From then on, I have no idea where I was at, where I was going or anything," he said from his daughter's front porch on Monday. He eventually ended up on U.S. Route 1 (Richmond Highway) in Alexandria, where he ran out of gas. His forest green 2004 Ford Ranger was on the side of that major highway for some period before someone helped him push it off to the side and into the parking lot of a strip mall. According to his daughter, Peacemaker is old-fashioned, preferring to use cash, and had left the house with just enough money for his planned outing to the racetrack. He found himself in a strange city with no money for gas and a dead cell phone.

Peacemaker said he tried for days to borrow money from strangers, trying to explain his situation, and promising to pay back the money he needed for gas.

"It's scary when nobody wants to talk to you. They wouldn't give you 50 cents or a dollar in case I really got hungry," he said.

Lewis added that her father did not eat for six days. He used an empty Pepsi bottle from his truck to get water from a nearby spigot. Having returned seven pounds lighter, Peacemaker said he was not concerned about eating while he was missing.

"I was worried about how I'm going to get back home, instead of worried about being hungry. I never got hungry, not one bit. I didn't do all this stuff on purpose. I would never do that. I wasn't trying to hide from anybody. I saw cop cars going through. I thought they'd come over to see what was going on," he said, noting that only two people offered assistance. One man gave him \$5 that Peacemaker used to buy a bottle of water and a small amount of gas in case he was forced to leave the parking lot where he was staying, spending hot days and sleeping upright in the truck on cold nights.

"I couldn't walk too far so I thought the best thing I could do was stay where I was at," Peacemaker said. "I asked people for help. I'm the type of person that I won't beg for stuff, but I got to the point where I almost did. I had money in the bank, but didn't have money on me."

While her father was trying to figure a way out of his situation, Lewis initiated an extensive search, first with the Strasburg Police Department and then with assistance from the Frederick County Sheriff's Office, where her husband, R. Lewis, is a deputy.

"I know my dad's routine. I take care of him. I take care of his meds and do his laundry and take him to get food if he needs it from Food Lion, everything," said Lewis, explaining that she went to check on her father Sunday after having not heard back from him for a couple days, a situation that was not entirely uncommon as he has a tendency to let his cell phone

battery die. "I know his routine. If he's not at the Queen Street Diner, he's home in his pink recliner that we gave him watching the Western shows. So when he wasn't there, I knew. I knew immediately that something wasn't right, especially after dark."

Lewis shared information about her dad on Facebook, asking the community to help search for him, and as the days passed, she became more frightened.

"He knew that if he could just talk to a police officer, he could have them contact his son-in-law. He knew he'd come get him. He was thinking right if he could have just gotten somebody to talk to him," said Lewis as she sat with her dad on Monday. "He said he got embarrassed after a while because everybody kept shooing him away. He just got to a point where he was giving up and then that seventh day, he took a chance."

That Friday, June 2, Peacemaker got the break he needed when he met Chiqui "Jenny" Escobar, who was working her final shift at the nearby J+J Laundromat.

"I ended up close to a laundromat. That's where I used the bathroom and got me a bottle of water. I asked someone there a couple of days before that and she said, 'no, we can't do anything,'" Peacemaker said. But that Friday, Escobar was there alone and so he asked her for help, asking for \$20 for gas to get back home.

She went into the back and returned with the \$20, plus a bottle of water and a banana, the first food Peacemaker had in a week. He was so overjoyed he "almost kissed her," he said, adding that he plans to pay her back with interest for her kindness.

"She was the only one who would talk to me a little bit. I said to myself many times, 'What am I going to do? What am I going to do?' Nobody wants to lend me any money," Peacemaker said.

"I think that's the saddest part of everything. Everybody thinks that everyone who is asking for help just wants it for drugs. You gotta listen before you say no," said his daughter.

Asked what inspired her to help Peacemaker, Escobar said, "My heart is never wrong. I knew he was a good person and he needed my help, maybe because my dad came to mind. I come from a humble, but very close family, used to helping people in need, even with the little we have."

Lewis is grateful for Escobar's generosity. "She's so sweet. I can't wait to meet her in person," she said. "We've already made plans. We're going to do it in a couple of weeks. I can't let that go unnoticed. I am so thankful that she talked to him when he came in."

Peacemaker was able to take that cash, get gas, ask for directions, and make his way the 10 or 12 blocks to the Capital Beltway and then to Interstate 66. He was home around lunchtime.

Lewis was at work at Cedar Creek Dental when she got the call that her father was safe.

"The only thing I heard was this lady screaming. She was like 'your dad's home. Your dad's home.' And, I'm like, 'who is this?'" Lewis recalled, adding that the call came from someone in the management office at her father's apartment building. "I think I fell to the floor when I went into the office. On the phone, the first thing I said was 'Dad, where have you been?' I could tell in his voice, he sounded really weak. He said, 'I've been lost' and then I just completely changed my whole demeanor. I said, 'I'm on my way.' When I walked in there, I dropped to my knees and cried in his lap."

Peacemaker spoke with Strasburg Police Lt. Philip Henry and was evaluated by a rescue squad that afternoon. He has since been processing what happened and recovering. A diabetic, Peacemaker suffered a stroke five years ago and was without medication for both

conditions for the duration of his ordeal. Lewis said that her dad was severely dehydrated and remains stiff, sore, and emotional, and will undergo further testing this week.

And, while Lewis is thrilled to have him back and grateful to Escobar, she is angry that it took so long for her dad to get the help he needed.

“He said he saw so many cops going back and forth and it’s sad because there was a ‘be on the lookout’ everywhere,” said Lewis. “I’m a huge supporter of law enforcement. My husband is a police officer for the Frederick County Sheriff’s Department. I can’t get it out of my head how, as much as this has been covered, how was he not seen? He was right on Route 1.”

Lewis said her husband spoke with a sergeant with the Fairfax County Police Department, who was alarmed and concerned that Peacemaker and his vehicle went unnoticed.

“Our local jurisdictions did a great job with the initial report on him missing and trying to further the investigation. It’s unfortunate that other jurisdictions didn’t take the opportunity to help out someone who was on the side of the road for six days, parked along a major highway,” Deputy R. Lewis said.

Added his wife, “There’s a reason for the alerts that go out. There’s a reason for the picture and the truck and watch out for this vehicle, especially in the state of Virginia, that’s where it was highly publicized. There’s no reason for it. It was completely overlooked.”

Lewis is focused now on helping her father heal. That included a visit to church on Sunday, followed by a meal to celebrate his return. Lewis laughed when she said that she received a call from one of her dad’s neighbors while they were out, reporting to her that he hadn’t been seen in a while.

And his return has meant time at his favorite restaurant, the Queen Street Diner, where Peacemaker eats breakfast every day they’re open.

“Them people are like family. It’s just the way they are. They’ll stay and talk to you. Some places just want to get you in and out,” Peacemaker said.

Added Lewis, “They haven’t let him pay for breakfast since he’s been back.”