

Jacqueline Pinol:

The Canine Condition. Come, sit, stay. Welcome to the Canine Condition podcast. My name is Jacqueline Pinol. I am an actor, documentary filmmaker and animal rescue advocate. The Canine Condition podcast is a platform to bring awareness to dog adoption and to provide all dog lovers and pet owners with information and resources on how to raise a healthy and well-balanced dog.

If you are thinking about getting your first dog, or just want to know where and how you can help a dog in need, this is also a place for you. Have you ever met royalty? I bet you have and you didn't even know it. You see, if you've ever had a pug or met one even in passing, you've met royalty. In ancient times, pugs were bred to be companions for ruling families in China.

The pet pugs were highly valued by Chinese emperors. And the royal pug dogs were kept in luxury and guarded by soldiers. Pugs later spread to other parts of Asia. In Tibet, Buddhist monks kept pugs as pets in their monasteries. Pugs were then brought from China to Europe in the 16th century, and popularized in Western Europe by the House of Orange of the Netherlands and the House of Stuart.

In the United Kingdom, in the 19th century, Queen Victoria developed a passion for pugs, which she passed on to other members of the royal family. These charming little dogs are known for being sociable, gentle and even tempered. So, how is it that in a time of such progress, as is the 21st century, pugs have gone from being royalty to ending up homeless and sometimes sick in city shelters, abandoned on the streets, or in meat markets back in some countries in Asia?

My guest on the podcast today is here to shed some light and give us hope that change is happening and that this wonderful pug breed can be saved and protected if we all work together. It is my pleasure to welcome Gwenn Vallone, a founder and board member of Pug Nation LA Rescue, based in California. Pug Nation LA is a licensed, non-profit organization dedicated to the rescue, care and safe placement of abandoned, unwanted, displaced, and abused pugs. One pug at a time.

Hi, Gwenn. Welcome to the Canine Condition podcast.

Gwenn Vallone:

Thank you. How are you doing?

Jacqueline Pinol:

I'm so excited. I'm good. As you well know, I'm a pug lover. My first dog ever that I got on my own was a puggy, and she was a fawn pug named Gracie who has since passed. But my love of pugs has only grown since then. And they're a very special breed. So, I'm very happy to talk to Gwenn today about Pug Nation LA Rescue. Gwenn, tell us, most people I know are surprised or heartbroken that pugs end up in city shelters.

They are these just sweet little, just lovable creatures that are so innocent. And none of us can imagine why they would end up in a shelter. What are some of the reasons that they do?

Gwenn Vallone:

I think the number one reason people surrender or let their pugs loose are health reasons. So, I think that's the number one thing, that they don't anticipate the expenses. And when an expense comes along, they surrender the pug to the shelter.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And for my listeners, you should know that I did meet Gwenn several years ago when we started our DOGumentary filming for the documentary. And I got to meet lots of pugs at the rescue, at the facility that you were at then. And one of the things you said to us in the interview, you mentioned this thing about us being an instant gratification society. And it's been a few years since that journey and here we are.

I don't see that that has changed. What do you think about that statement? And that being a part of American culture nowadays, how does it help or hurt the rescue movement?

Gwenn Vallone:

I agree, unfortunately, nothing has changed. It hurts dogs in general because people don't think it through. I realize a lot of people that, let's say, aren't experienced with pugs, they don't do research on the breed. They just either see a pug in a movie or see a cute pug puppy and they want it. And they don't realize that many breeds have special needs for their breed, but pugs especially. They have skin problems. They have eye problems. They have breathing problems.

And I don't think people are prepared and they don't think things through. So, it's like cute dog, I want it, and they don't think about it. And then, they get into trouble fairly quickly. So, I think it hurts rescue dogs, in general, that people don't think about it as a 12, 14, 16-year commitment, depending on the age of the dog of course. They just think, especially let's take the pandemic as an example.

All of a sudden, people found themselves alone at home or working and they thought, "You know what, a dog would be great now that I'm stuck at home." So, they didn't think long term. They thought, "Right now, I need a companion because I have time," and that's not necessarily great for the dogs right now as things open up because people didn't think it was, like I said, a decade commitment to the dog.

Jacqueline Pinol:

For those listeners who may not be as familiar with the breed, what is that care? And how picky do you have to be as a rescue when adopting out the ones that you've already saved?

Gwenn Vallone:

The tricky part is, of course, we want these dogs in homes. We have a great facility, great staff, but the goal here is to get them in homes. So, we don't want to be overboard picky, or we'd have a thousand pugs here at the facility. But we do try gently to make the people understand that there could be costs down the line, a lot of cares. So, their eyes seem to be the number one thing that goes south.

So, it could be your pug doesn't produce the proper tears. So, you might have to lubricate the dog's eyes twice a day. And it seems simple but it's something that's very important because if their eyes get dry, they get ulcers and you get into a lot of trouble. Same thing, a lot of pugs, their folds get yeasty. Their ears and skin get yeasty. If they're not on the right diet, like pugs have a really high allergy chance, right?

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. Yes, yes.

Gwenn Vallone:

And sometimes it's hard to diagnose what's causing that allergy. It could be something in the environment, it could be their food, it could be they were just born that way. So, you really have to pay attention to what's going on. A personal thing happened to me, I have a little guy with some back-end weakness. And I watched my pugs like hawks, all over them.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yes, I do.

Gwenn Vallone:

And within 24 hours, he was blocked. He couldn't urinate. But because I'm experienced with it and I know what I'm looking for and I know he's prone to infections, I knew right away he was blocked. And it turned into he needed surgery to remove stones. And that's something, obviously, that doesn't happen all the time but it's just an example that you have to really everyday check that pug. Look at his folds. Look at his ear. Look at his eyes, and it's a constant thing.

And for we who love pugs, it's a thing from love, right? It's not a burden. That's what people have to understand, it is a lot of work sometimes. And yes, there are pugs out there that you could get and they'll have no problems their whole time. And I don't even want to put a percentage on it, but especially as they grow older, you have to be prepared to really monitor them and know what to look for and know how to fix any problems before they get huge.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. Yeah. And preventative care, I mean, I know that that can also be costly but there are things we can do, even just for all our pets, for any dog. The expense and the prevention saves us, the heartache later maybe, and the vet bills. But like you said, I do agree that you have to pay attention daily, like we do with our kids or human children. You notice something, then you're like, "Something is off today. What's going on?"

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes, yes.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And do you get word about every pug that ends up in a Los Angeles shelter? I mean, are you able to take them all in or do you have to collaborate with other rescues when you don't have space?

Gwenn Vallone:

Well, our motto is that we will never refuse a pug. So, we do usually get word of every pug that's in a shelter, either concerned people. So, I get emails, messages, tagged on Facebook, tagged on Instagram, which is great. I tell everyone all the time, I'd rather find out five times about a pug than not at all.

Some shelters, because we've rescued so many times from them, will contact us for a special needs pug especially or a senior, and they know the public isn't going to adopt the pug. So, I would say in most instances, we are alerted and then we act right away. It depends on the shelter. Some they're ready to give them right away with a medical waiver.

Some we have to get on a list and just wait if they're on stray hold. But I pursue every single lead we get for a pug.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's wonderful. It's good to know, it really does. When I see the pugs in shelters, I freak. And I'm already thinking, can I take that pug in? What do I do? What can I do, because it's hard.

Gwenn Vallone:

I would love listeners to understand that every shelter, almost, has a different way to let the pugs go. So, it's not as easy as we call and we say, "Hey, we're Pug Nation, give us the pug." There's stray holds. There's complications. If the chip is registered, they have to give the owner, I think, it's 10 days in some shelters to come claim their pug. So, I think people get frustrated out there. They tell us about the pug.

And then, they see the pug listed for a week, 10 days, and they just keep coming back to us. And they don't understand that there's a process. I would love, love, love, love if I see a pug and I could walk right in and grab it. But we have to just follow the rules. I want everyone to be rest assured out there that if we know about a pug, we are on the list or in contact and doing everything we can to get the pug.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Can you explain to us what the stray hold means? I know now what it means, but for some of our listeners and people who are, with the best of intentions, reaching out to you to please help pugs. And then, you have to say, we have to wait for that stray hold. What does that mean?

Gwenn Vallone:

The stray hold means, if a dog is picked up off the street as a stray, the shelter legally has to keep that pug to give the owner a chance. So, if there's no chip, meaning they scan the dog, there's no microchip in the dog, some shelters it's three days, some five, some seven. So, they legally have to hold the dog in the shelter for three, five, seven days in case the owner comes looking.

So, let's say we contact the shelter right away. They say, "Okay, the stray hold is over in five days." And then and only then are we eligible to get the dog. And like I mentioned before, if the dog has a microchip, they have to legally reach out and give the person most times, unfortunately, 10 days to contact them back.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Wow. That's a long time.

Gwenn Vallone:

And it's frustrating because in some cases, we've watched that dog online and they've been there nine days. And then, the owner might show up. In a few cases, unfortunately, there was a glitch, like the letter was returned because I think they have to send a letter and call.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh.

Gwenn Vallone:

So, it's frustrating because you would think most people that are missing their dog would scour the shelters and everything.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh. Of course, right away, desperately.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right. But it's frustrating and again, people are like, "Why aren't you getting that pug?" And I wish we could just march right in, but we have to wait for the stray hold. In some cases, if the dog is in really bad shape, there are shelters that do what's called a medical release. So, we can sign on for that dog and realize that the dog isn't legally ours.

We will still give medical attention if the dog needs it, knowing that if the owner comes forward that we don't have to get reimbursed legally. We're just putting ourselves out there, but we'll do it. But unfortunately, a lot of shelters don't have medical release programs or they feel the dog has to be really bad before they do that.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And that really bad is such a gray area with pugs.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes. Yes, it is.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Because to me, a little bit with pugs is really bad.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right. So, I mean, the bottom line is we do everything we can. We can't go barging in and get the dog as much as we'd like to. So, rest assured that if there was a stray hold, we're waiting and watching. I can't do that all myself. Our volunteers are great. They will keep in contact with the shelter. And the moment that dog is available to us, we will go get the pug.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And to my listeners, I will say we talked about this particular, I don't know if it's a law or rule in California. But in Episode 8 of my podcast, we spoke to Freedom Beagle Project. And they express that there is a bill they're trying to pass called Georgie's Law to help rescuers be able to advocate and keep those medical dogs and not have to just relinquish them to an owner who chooses to take them out of vet care or out of the rescue just because, you know what I mean?

That it would be nice to at least have that pet safely treated and healed before that owner can get it back. Because right now, the law says as soon as the owner shows up, no matter what, they can just take it home against all veterinary advice and rescue policy.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah, that's tough. I mean, we've been in that position. And legally, we don't have a leg to stand on. We have to give the dog back, and that is heartbreaking.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh. Yes.

Gwenn Vallone:

Heartbreaking. And it's also heartbreaking to see a dog show up in the shelter three times. So, the dog keeps running away. So, that's one really hard aspect of rescue is to see a dog that isn't being taken care of. And we'll do our best to talk to the owner. Look, I know it's expensive, whatever, and I explain what our rescue can do for their dog.

And a few times, I've been successful in having the owner sign them over. They did a little introspection and they thought, "You know what, honestly, I can't take care of this dog." So, that's a nice thing to see that owners will do what's better for their dogs, but there are, unfortunately, some that won't.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yes. It's always surprising to me people that won't accept help, and I see it a lot in rescue. There are a lot of wonderful rescue organizations across the country willing to help you and your dog, or if you know anyone whose dog needs help. And it is actually the dog owner that gets in the way and says "No, I don't want that." I don't know if it's pride, if they feel shameful that they need help. But like you said, I wish they would think about the dog first in those extreme cases.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. I mean, unfortunately, I call it like I see it. And there are some selfish people out there. A person will contact us to relinquish a dog but selfishly, it would make them sad, even though they know they can't provide the proper care. So, they'll keep the dog and in a lot of cases three months later, then they relinquish the dog and the health is really bad. So, I think a lot of it is selfish motivation. They want to keep the dog and that's unfortunate, too.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And now that you mentioned the relinquishment, I did notice on your website that you have a relinquishment form. And it's actually worded very nicely, maybe as to not offend or scare people who want to relinquish their dog. But talk to us about why it's important to present it that way. Because see, not every rescue takes owner surrenders, so I really think it's wonderful to see those that can and do.

Gwenn Vallone:

Well, thank you, first of all. We understand that there may be shame and a lot of sadness. I mean, some people, their hearts are in the right place, they just can't afford it. I mean, if a pug has a liver shunt and they needed \$8,000 surgery, I mean, I get it, there's a lot of people that can't afford that. So, we do want it to be an easy, seamless transition for them because it's about the dog.

So, obviously, if we beat up the owners or make them feel guilty or whatever, it's not going to be something that they're going to want to do, and they're not going to seek us out. And ultimately, the dog will end up in a shelter or worse. So, we want the dog. We want to be able to take care of the dog. So, we do try and make it a positive experience, as positive as it can be.

So, that's why we worded it like that and that's what our policy is because we don't want people to be so ashamed of reading or seeing that they'll be shamed, like dump the dog somewhere. So, I think it's worked out well that people understand. And we'll let them come look at the facility. We'll explain exactly how we place the dogs. If they tell us their dogs are bonded, we will tell them we will not separate those dogs.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Because sometimes it's more than one pug?

Gwenn Vallone:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. And we will tell them that if we observe that they're not bonded, or let's say they fight with each other, that we do have the right to adopt them out separately. But we would not separate a bonded dog. So, we do as well as we can to honor their wishes.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's wonderful and that's really nice to hear, especially because of course having had pugs and having my current, almost 15-year-old black pug, my heart is just... I cannot fathom that these little guys be left unattended and suffer. It's so quickly for them to go south, for lack of a better term. And then, let's talk about puppies because everybody loves puppies of every breed.

And when it comes to pug puppies, it might not be as quick or as easy to find one in rescue. So, how does Pug Nation Rescue feel about pug breeders in 2021?

Gwenn Vallone:

Breeders is such a dirty word to a rescuer.

Jacqueline Pinol:

You're telling me. Yeah, I know.

Gwenn Vallone:

You want me to be completely honest or you want me to sugarcoat this a little bit?

Jacqueline Pinol:

Let's be completely honest. Let's give it to our listeners raw.

Gwenn Vallone:

Okay. So, people love to use the word reputable breeders. And I'm sure there are some out there who spend the proper money to get prenatal care for the dog, for the mama, and give shots and things like that. But, again, with percentages, I would guess if I had to guess that 90%, 95% of what are called breeders are not reputable. And certainly, the people selling puppies on Craigslist or otherwise, they're horrible. They're horrible.

They don't give the dog shots. So, I get that kind of breeders need to exist. I really think until there are no dogs in shelters that are euthanized, they don't really need to be breeding right now. But the other side of this that people don't think about because if you think about anything that's done for profit isn't looking out for the dogs. And I've personally delivered, I'd say, maybe eight litters here at Pug Nation.

We either rescue a dog. We either know or don't know that's pregnant. The females hate it. It's not like a human that wants to experience, and their body feels great, and the whole joy of giving birth. They hate it. They hate it during, they hate it after. They can't wait to get away from those puppies. So, dogs are suffering to bring those puppies.

And again, breeders will come back and say, "Well, eventually all pugs will run out." Well, I get that. And the really bad breeders will breed siblings. And all these pugs that seem to eventually come to us with birth defects or the health problems a lot of times are due to poor breeding as well. So, I am not a fan. I'm not a fan, and there's a lot of reasons why.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And all the pugs that come to you, I mean, I say to people, you want a pug from a breeder? Go to Pug Nation LA. Literally, I have said that.

Gwenn Vallone:

Great point. And honestly, we do get puppies.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I've seen them. I've seen you post some.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right. Right now, I think we've got three. We always have a waiting list but it's not as long as you think. And I know that in other parts of the country or the world where pugs aren't a problem, like homeless pugs aren't a problem, people are on those waiting lists for two years. But I could say, if you want a puppy and you go through the pre-approval process and are willing to wait, you will get a rescue puppy because we've had 100% healthy puppies turned in.

Let's say an older couple decided, "We're going to get a puppy." And then, they realize this isn't a good idea and they'll bring us the dog. Or like I said, we'll rescue a pregnant female and will have a litter of eight pug puppies. So, it's possible if people have patience. And I would urge people not to support breeders, unless if they really, really, really need to buy a puppy, check that breeder out. Look out references.

If they don't let you come meet the parents and see where the puppies are kept, I would venture to say something as shady. So, unless a reputable breeder, and I'm doing quotes in the air as I talk to you, so unless they really are transparent, I wouldn't say they were someone worth supporting. Let's put it that way.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. And definitely not buying pugs from pet stores if that's even still happening.

Gwenn Vallone:

It's heartbreaking because at least six or seven times in my career so far, I've had a person call me crying because their senior just died, so they wanted a puppy. They didn't want to go through the senior years again, which I understand. They bought a puppy off Craigslist and it has distemper, it has parvo, and it's just heartbreaking. And these breeders, they just disappear after they sell you the puppy. And it's just heartbreak.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And for those "reputable breeders", people are on those lists also for a long time because there's only one litter, whatever, every heat cycle, which just hurts my heart to think that a reputable breeder, somebody makes it their job, to I guess have their dog have babies every cycle. To me, it's not okay, it's sick. And that, to me, is putting it plain and simple.

A lot of it I think is, us as the consumer and perhaps that instant gratification society that you had mentioned to us in the documentary is, oh, we just want what we want, and you're not going to tell me what to do. And that attitude just doesn't sit well with me. I think we need a little bit more of self-reflection and saying, is there any way I could just consider not getting one this way and still get a dog that will make me so happy and that will give me years of joy?

Gwenn Vallone:

A 100%. The hard thing is when people, they will fill out their application and they say they want a senior. And they'll come in and they'll see a puppy and they want the puppy, and it's frustrating. And I would say the average lifespan of a pug is 12, 14, 16 years, right? So, if you adopt a four-year-old, you're talking about eight years of life.

Jacqueline Pinol:

At least, sometimes more. I met one the other day that's 19 and one that's 16. And they walked out our street, and they're just trotting along, and they're so cute. I couldn't believe they were that old.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. So, I would urge people, like you say, consider maybe an older dog. And I get, you have a senior now, and the senior years are tough. It's a lot of work. I wouldn't change it for the world, and you want them to last forever. But a lot of people go through that and go through expenses of a senior dog, medical expenses. And they're like, "You know what, I just for a while, I need to just have a low maintenance dog." Well, first of all, there's really no such thing.

Jacqueline Pinol:

There isn't. No.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right? And second of all, you just don't know, God forbid, you get a two-year-old pug or a puppy and a year down the line, they could have cancer. It's not guaranteed that if you get a young dog, you're going to be carefree for years.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Right. I hear puggies in the background.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah, yeah. Once in a while, they get loud, even through two doors.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I love it.

Gwenn Vallone:

So, I would urge people to look. And honestly, I would never get a puppy. They're so hard, so hard to treat.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Not anymore. No. Yes, it's a lot. It's a lot. To get a puppy is having like a newborn child. And look, I got mine. And I have come clean about this in the earlier episodes of the podcast because this is how I learned when I got my first pug. I did get her from a breeder. It was 2002. I had no idea where else I would get a pug and that's what my friends said that we should do is go find a good breeder.

Jacqueline Pinol:

They said, "Don't buy from a pet store." So, I knew that part was okay, right. I was like, "Okay, I've checked all the boxes." And look, she was from a good breeder. I saw the mom. I saw the papa dog. But I didn't think past that until years later, I thought, "Oh my God, are they still breeding those dogs?" It started to not sit well with me. And I was like, I never again.

But I will tell you, Gwenn, I got Zeus, my black pug, from a pet store. Oh, naughty girl. Years later, we walk into buy dog food because we're on a day trip and we didn't bring our Gracie's food with us. And we're going to be gone all day. And I walk in and the first thing, and these pet stores will get you. They place those puppies right at the entrance. And I saw a black pug in a cage and I felt like I was looking at a dog in a shelter.

And I thought I need to get this dog out of here, and that's how they get you. But then, after that, I learned my lesson because I started to find out that there were pugs to rescue because I ran into some. Now, I didn't know back then, I know now. And what I say to people is, if anything, even if this is the first time and you're listening to this episode of the podcast, let the light bulb stay on, please.

Gwenn Vallone:

A 100%, a 100%. There are many people that come, and they already have a pug. And they say right away, "We got it from a breeder. We didn't know." And I'm like, "We're not here to persecute you because you got a pug. We're here to offer you a rescue pug now." And I think within the last, what, 10 years, rescue has really come to the forefront, and people are getting more educated.

It's just like anything else, you don't know what you don't know. But once you know it, then don't go to a breeder, right?

Jacqueline Pinol:

Exactly. Time to make that change and maybe jump on board. I come from that experience, which is why I don't shame anyone and I don't get angry, unless you just keep doing it because you say, "Well, I want to and you're not going to tell me what to do." Then, I'm going to take issue with you.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right. Right where it's easier. Right. Agreed, agreed.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Are there pugs that just have it more difficult time getting adopted or that just don't get adopted? What happens to the puggies that have that kind of a journey with you, guys?

Gwenn Vallone:

Fortunately, we adopt out dogs with so many special needs, dogs that we never thought would get a home. It just takes a little longer. But I think the ones that don't get along with others take a while because a lot of pug people have at least two. So, the ones that don't get along and also the ones that do need extra special care, so let's say they can't walk and their bladder may need to be expressed because they don't have those muscles, people shy away from that.

And we've really been trying to illustrate that it's not that hard and that what you get back from a special needs pug is way worth the special effort. So, I would say our diabetic or handicap pugs or the ones that don't get along with others, and unfortunately right now, we have two that are not only handicap, but on top of that, they don't get along with others. So, it really narrows down the perspective homes, but we always hold out hope.

I have to say, there's been some dogs here that I thought this dog will never find a home. There have been a few mixes who have been aggressive towards people, too. And I'm like, "Who is going to come in here and adopt this dog that's going to bite them," but some people do, thankfully. So, I would say that 99% of the dogs that come in here do get adopted. Some are lifers, but that's why we are happy to have a facility and staff that love them.

So, if they can't be in a home, at least they're here and they're safe, and they get top-notch food, and love, and walks, and everything else, so.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's awesome. And the funny thing is, when I hear that pugs don't get along with others, it's mind boggling to me because our pugs have been the absolute friendliest dogs ever. And my black pug now lives with five Pit bull mixes, who are also a very friendly breed. And I think it's all on how we raise them.

So, if people do insist on getting their pug from a breeder, or they just did, or they adopted last year, or they bought it from a pet store, wherever, I think the number one thing is to remind ourselves as pet owners to socialize them properly, to expose them to other dogs and to children, and to give them boundaries and rules and guidance. Those doggies, even though they're small, still need training and socialization.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes, a 100%, a 100%.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Because I can take Zeus anywhere. He is a Zen master. If may be other dogs, I might not trust, but he can go anywhere. And it's lovely to have that kind of freedom when you have a pug.

Gwenn Vallone:

Oh, yeah, a 100%. I mean, it's pretty rare. I mean, most of the aggression is food aggression, which is easy, right? You just feed them in extra rooms. But being a rescue, we don't know what they've been through. A lot of times, unfortunately, children abuse the dogs and then they're angry around kids. So, it does happen but you're right, that's a great point.

You still have to train them, you have to socialize them. Because if they're just hidden from other dogs, they won't know how to act around other dogs. So, that's a great point. But those are the ones that need special placement. But there are, fortunately, families like say you're in an apartment, you're only allowed one dog. Then, you're fine with the dog.

But the trick is, a lot of people have family members with other dogs. So, when they get together, there's other dogs. So, that's why it's a little tricky to place the ones that don't get along with others.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Got you. Okay. But you do, like you say, you do find a new scope out and vet people properly so you can see if they are the right fit for a dog that has that kind of behavior.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. We always like to say we're not just trying to find a home or trying to find the right home. Because what's the sense if we just place a dog knowing they don't get along with other dogs and then they just come back? So, on our application, we asked a lot of questions. We're doing virtual house checks right now. We ask a lot of questions.

When they come in in person, we ask some more questions. We just want to make sure it's the right fit. So, obviously, if a dog here has to be separated and the person already has dogs, we steer them towards another dog.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Yeah. It makes my heart happy to know that there is that open mind about hey, every single one might actually find a home. We just wait. There's no hurry.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. We've had one little girl, unfortunately, coming up on two years. She's a mix and she's both dog, and people aggressive. So, she's been a little challenging. Her name is [Gabbana 00:34:12]. And she was rescued off the streets of Tijuana and so maybe she had to fight for everything she got, who knows?

But she loves people who she's used to. So, it's just going to take that person that realizes that she might not like them for a little bit. But once you start feeding her and walking her and everything, she will get in line and love you. So, fingers crossed for her.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Fingers crossed for Gabbana. Now, that you mentioned Gabbana coming from Tijuana, Mexico, I see a lot of posts. And I know friends of mine that are not in the dog rescue world have addressed this issue with me or asked me, why are rescues taking dogs in from other countries, especially with pugs? They see them saved from China or Korea or they meet people who said, "Oh, I adopted her. She's from Korea."

Given that in this country, we're still euthanizing and there's so many pugs to save here, does Pug Nation also consider and commit to saving dogs from other countries and why?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes. We didn't go looking to get involved in this, but a liaison from China was pretty desperate because the situation over there is pretty dire. I just want to stress that no dog in our area, which is a pretty wide area, all the way to inland empire, south, north to central coast, we still were rescuing our local dogs. We'd never turn our back on a pug. It's hard to refuse a pug in dire situation. So, we did the initial rescue.

And I think the best part about this is, I'm not sure if your listeners know that in other parts of the country, like the East Coast, Pacific Northwest specifically, Canada, rescue pugs are few and far between. I think I mentioned earlier, people are on the waiting list for years. So, once we got the initial influx of China pugs and saw that there was still a great need, a magical thing happened because I don't know why but rescues don't really work well with each other.

But it was magical because we realize that these other areas of the country that people are dying to adopt pugs, like dying to adopt pugs, we realize, well, they would be great candidates for these Chinese pugs. So, unfortunately, they wouldn't fly from China to the east coast or whatever, it was just through LA. So, we partnered up with, I'd say off the top of my head, 10 other rescues around the country.

And we agreed we would go pick up the pugs. We would bathe them here at our facility. We would house them for a few days. And then, for example, 55 pugs came in from China.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh, 55?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. We took care of them. And then, the East Coast rescue is I think there were three or four that banded together, got a charter flight from LA to the East Coast. And then, those pugs went there where there aren't rescue pugs, and they were adopted out. And we did the same thing with a couple of Pacific Northwest rescues. So, I think the easy answer is the pugs are in dire need, so that's why we wanted to do it.

The second thing is no local pugs were left behind because we turned our attention to China. And the third thing is now, there's saturation in other parts of the country that don't have the problem the Los Angeles area has with overpopulation of pugs. The Chinese pugs were sent to those areas where there were waiting homes. So, I looked at it as a win-win all around.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Those pugs bringing rescues together, look at that.

Gwenn Vallone:

Exactly, exactly.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's so cool. Okay. I didn't know that. And for people who asked me a lot of times, I say everyone has the reasons, I'm sure. Every situation is different. And like you said, as long as none of our dogs, meaning our, the ones that need us here in the United States, are getting left behind and there's room and time and boots on the ground to help more, why not?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah. And the pugs in China, basically, they're breeding dogs. So, they're made to breed. They're kept in cages. When they can't breed anymore, so when they can't make anyone money, they're literally thrown on the streets or sold to meat markets. So, the rescuers on the ground there literally shop the meat markets and get those pugs to safety.

But there was a backlog because they couldn't find a rescue to take a good amount of them and that's why we got involved. But it's really hard as a rescuer to say, "Oh, well, they're away in China. It's not our problem," when you see pictures and hear these stories. So, that's how we initially got involved. And then, like I said, it worked its way out as far as pugs in other areas and things like that.

So, I think it's really good. We'll probably continue to do it, continue to siphon them off to other rescues if we're full or something like that.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Do you think in any way it's helping people in China learn about better treatment of animals or that rescue exists? I mean, is there any headway in that direction so that other countries learn to take care of their own? Or we're not quite there?

Gwenn Vallone:

I don't know and unfortunately, I don't think so because the moneymakers are going to want to make money. And the culture over there, from what I understand, I'm far from an expert, but I talked to pug rescue of Korea and the people that are liaisons to China. And what they tell me is in the Asian culture, and again, it's changing slowly just like rescue changed here in the US.

But from what I understand, if a dog isn't a puppy, it's considered used. So, just the culture is different. So, people aren't going to be like, "Oh, my God, this wonderful four-year-old, I'm going to adopt it. It's a used puppy." So, it's a puppy or nothing, basically. And of course, I'm sure it will slowly change, I hope so, because these dogs, they're still fairly young.

They're mostly females. Because when they're in their cages, there's one male to every six females.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh.

Gwenn Vallone:

So, I guess they're breed out when they're only four. So, when they come over here, we've got this cute four-year-old. They have health problems and stuff, but there's a lot of life left in them. But because culturally over there, and again, I'm not an expert, I'm just going by what I've been told.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Stories they share with you.

Gwenn Vallone:

Right. Those are used dogs, and not many people are going to say, "Oh, I want that dog." They want the puppies.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Well, my hopes are that, as rescues help more international dogs, that we are also hopefully setting an example in spreading the message of how to rescue and adapt to citizens of other nations if we can live by example. But I know we still have a long way to go. So, it's a tough fight.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah, I was going to say that. Here in the LA area, a lot of times, we're not the greatest shining beacon of an example. It's a mixed bag. Rescues really up and coming. It's the thing now, but there sure are plenty of people who are still only wanting puppies or breeding or throwing away their dogs. So, it's a mixed bag.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And I wanted to bring attention to your new facility, although it's not new like yesterday new, but in the last couple years since I've met you?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah, yeah. We moved in here last July, I think, so July of 2020. So, it's less than a year we've been here.

Jacqueline Pinol:

So, the new facility is as of 2020. Okay. For our listeners who don't know where the facility is and what it's like, I do know that you shared with us in your on-camera interview, you said Pug Nation LA is a place that makes people feel uplifted when they volunteer. So, talk to us a little bit about the experience of spending a day or a weekend volunteering for Pug Nation LA.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yeah, a 100%. Unfortunately, right now, our volunteer program is on hold because of COVID. But the good news is, in first week of June, I'm going to meet with the volunteer coordinators and we're going to revamp the program and hopefully have people back in July. But as far as walking in here, we've all gone to shelters. And there's different levels of shelters, city shelters, county shelters, but most are pretty depressing.

You have dogs behind cages and kennels crying, wanting for things. We are fortunate enough through a few big donors and then a lot of private donors to have the funds to have a facility here. It's staffed 24 hours. So, the pugs are never alone in case they fight or there's a seizure or something like that. But it's free-roaming for the most part. We did talk about pugs that don't get along with others.

So, they have their own private suites but everything is open. It's bright, it's airy. We have doors on the front and the back of the facility that are big garage doors, so there's a lot of fresh air. And one of the biggest reasons we wanted to move, other than paying escalating rent, was that we didn't have a little outdoor place where the pugs could run around. So, they were free-roaming inside, and we would walk them as much as possible.

But with 40 dogs, it's hard to get them all out. So, we really wanted an outdoor part. And in our new facility, we have a little corral in the back. It has artificial grass, it has shade. And we can funnel them out there and they could run around and get fresh air and sunshine, which is amazing to watch how excited they are. I will add that when we got our first shipment of pugs from China, those dogs were just so quiet.

And we put them in our van. We took them out of their crates. We put them in our van, and the whole ride was quiet. And I'm like, "Why aren't they excited?" And I think they were just scared. So, we pulled in the back and I opened the big door of the van, and they saw the yard and they started screaming. We handed them over the fence and they were running around. They were so-

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my gosh, my heart.

Gwenn Vallone:

... happy just to be... it's artificial grass but they're in grass, fresh air.

Jacqueline Pinol:

They feel the sun. Yes. Mine love to sunbathe.

Gwenn Vallone:

Oh, yeah. You know pugs love sun. So, they just find those spots and they're laying out there. And so, the outdoor area is amazing. So, I feel that people come in expecting to see dogs in cages. And when they see how happy these dogs are with their cushy beds, and their toys, and running around, and barking, and being loved-

Jacqueline Pinol:

That's heaven.

Gwenn Vallone:

It is. It's heaven.

Jacqueline Pinol:

No wonder it's an uplifting experience to volunteer there.

Gwenn Vallone:

When we had those 55 pugs that we took in for the East Coast and then we had a full house here, I just went and sat in the middle of the pen and they all attack you and it is, it's heaven. So, I think that people don't know what to expect. And when they see the bright cheeriness and see how happy and healthy the pugs are, anyone who cares just loves it.

Jacqueline Pinol:

I love seeing that and I love hearing about it. And then, what are some of the programs for those who can't visit the facility or once you open back up with volunteers able to come to the facility? How can people support in other ways if they're fans of pugs or just want to give support to Pug Nation?

Gwenn Vallone:

We have a lot of cool stuff. I mean, there's the obvious. When we have events, we need the muscles to set it up, take care of the dogs at the events and everything. But a couple of years ago, we came up with a program and we called it the HiPPo Program, which stands for Honorary Pug Parent.

Because we realize that people with their own dogs can't necessarily foster, or these dogs that don't get along with others, we can put them in a foster home because people have dogs. So, we made a program that people could adopt on a rarely a pug and they had to commit to one or two hours a week. So, they come and spend time exclusively with their pug.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Oh, my goodness. Don't tempt me, Gwenn.

Gwenn Vallone:

Well, well, and that's the first volunteer program we're going to open up again. So, we encourage them to put their pug on social media. They can take them for sleepovers if their household will hold them. And before we have the yard in the back, we would let them take them to a park and take pictures. So, people love that because-

Jacqueline Pinol:

It's a great idea.

Gwenn Vallone:

Oh, yeah. They felt guilty like, "I can't foster, I can't adopt." And it's like, well, you know what-

Jacqueline Pinol:

I know. That's how I feel because I'm fool.

Gwenn Vallone:

And it's like you can adopt these pugs. So, they come in weekly or twice weekly. They have their time slot, and they really spend time. And let me tell you, some of the dogs, the turnaround that we witnessed with these dogs just looking forward to these visits. We had an old mix guy. Oh, my gosh, his name has escaped me, but he was pretty depressed, right?

He didn't get along with others, so he was separated and didn't get that much attention. We do our best. And boy, would he light up when his HiPPo daddy came to visit him. We couldn't even believe how happy this dog. And they're smart. They know what time of day and which days that their HiPPo is coming. And oh, Franklin, Franklin was his name.

He would light up when he saw his daddy coming, and it was great. And it kept him going until they could find home. So, I love the HiPPo Program and the volunteers love it, too.

Jacqueline Pinol:

That is a really cool idea. It's the first time I've heard of a program like that with a rescue. I just love that.

Gwenn Vallone:

And then, when we open up again, we're going to have volunteers. They sign up for their time and they could come walk dogs. They could bathe dogs. They could help staff with laundry. There's a ton of stuff around the facility that we need help with, other than our events. So, volunteers love to come just spend an hour a week walking dogs, brushing dogs.

Jacqueline Pinol:

And it helps them become more visible, even with the HiPPo Program, if we're posting them and having this connection. Does that increase their visibility? And has it increased their adoption possibility?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes, a 100%, whether it's a foster or a HiPPo. We have people of course. We have our own social media, and people see our dogs. But then, by extension, when people put it on their personal social media and they're like, "Oh, look at this dog. It's my HiPPo dog." And then, people will, "What does that mean?" And then, not only the dog is getting covered but the program itself.

So, it's done wonders. And of course, just like COVID with everything else, it's been on the back burner. But we're going to, hopefully in July, starting that up again.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Great, great. And where can our listeners find, follow and support Pug Nation LA?

Gwenn Vallone:

Our website is pugnationala.org. Our Facebook is @PugNationRescueofLosAngeles and Instagram is @pugnationla. And we have a great online presence. We also have Twitter. So, you can look for us-

Jacqueline Pinol:

Great, yes.

Gwenn Vallone:

... on Twitter.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Also Pug Nation LA?

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes. And we started a TikTok channel as well. So, we're all over the place.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Awesome. TikTok for all the young people.

Gwenn Vallone:

Yes, yes. I don't do it, but I have a young person that is killing it on TikTok, killing it. Yes.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Awesome, awesome. Well, I will have all those live links in the show notes, so anyone can find and follow Pug Nation LA with an easy click on your device. So, no excuses anybody.

Gwenn Vallone:

That's right.

Jacqueline Pinol:

Go reach out to Pug Nation LA. Our listeners should know that I am not getting paid to advocate for any one organization on this podcast. I choose to interview guests from organizations that I know are doing the good work for dogs and for people across America and clearly, beyond. Pug Nation LA has the Canine Condition seal of approval from me.

Thank you, Gwenn, so much for this lovely conversation about one of my favorite breeds.

Gwenn Vallone:

Jacque, thanks for having me. And I feel like we could talk for 10 hours about pugs.

Jacqueline Pinol:

We could, yes. Thank you for all the information and enlightening us with things, and the reminders. Even I need to be reminded of things sometimes, too. And I hope that our listeners will reach out or consider sharing this episode with anyone who may be interested in falling in love with a pug. Thank you, Gwenn.

Gwenn Vallone:

Thank you so much.

Jacqueline Pinol:

If you are a pug lover like me, I am sure you feel uplifted just listening to this conversation with Gwenn. No pug gets left behind. And if you're curious enough about this royal breed, I invite you to reach out to Pug Nation LA and see how you can help a pug in need. There are so many ways to help. What is easy and doable for you?

I leave you with this quote from Maya Angelou, be a rainbow in someone's cloud. I say, be a rainbow in a homeless pug's cloud. Thank you for joining me on this episode. Please, press subscribe on our podcast and tell your dog-loving friends about it. Until next time. Hang on to those leashes. The Canine Condition, come, sit, stay.