

“If you’re brave enough to say goodbye, life will reward you with a new hello.”

– Paul Coelho



A Letter From Denise Roelke

October 1, 2016

Today it is with mixed emotions that we announce NW Shibas4Life Rescue’s official closing day. Seventeen years ago, I started my journey with one step that changed my entire life. I began rescuing Shiba Inus and a few other breeds from time to time, too.

I grew up with the passion to save animals because my dad is an extraordinary Veterinarian who treats each animal case by case as if that animal is part of his own family. My mother is an animal rescuer who gives selflessly to every animal she rescues. Following in their footsteps, nurturing the frail and innocent who were helpless without a true voice came natural to me. I wanted to make a difference and change the world one Shiba at a time. It was exciting and rewarding.

When I started rescue, I had just got married, I was raising a young son, and I was beginning a new career in healthcare information technology. My family began a journey with me—taking on a huge responsibility to love unconditionally every dog that walked through our door. It was truly a new marriage with vows that would challenge us to become better people, build our strengths, learn from our weaknesses, and grow together, through better or worse.

I could write about a million things in my final rescue letter, but it would be more like a book, not a letter. Most of you know me, my board members, NW Shibas4Life Rescue dogs, and the impact that we have had on the rescue community over the years. The difference between our rescue and others is what we do, how we do it, and the fact that we have a lot of very good friends around the U.S. that support us.

In this final letter I want to write about issues at the very heart of rescue, complex and multi-layered issues that have kept me up at night—issues that I hope others will work to address. We need to become better at solving the very reasons why breed rescues exist.

When our rescue received our non-profit status, I was told this rare breed had very few rescues. I soon learned if there is a rare breed, there is no shortage of commercial breeders.

What is a commercial breeder? One definition I found is brief but to the point: “Puppies come from large scale commercial breeders, also known as puppy mills, where the animals are typically housed in less-than-humane conditions.” Then I learned that if an AKC breeder has a bitch that has puppies, breeders can sell the puppies with rights to breed them. The new owner becomes the breeder, the puppies have litters, and those puppies may end up in puppy mills.

Depending on the breeder, many larger scale breeders use auctions to move their surplus dogs. They are horrific events. At an auction commercial breeders sell dogs that are either too old, too tired to breed, or pregnant but whelped too few surviving puppies. If a commercial breeder has too many puppies after they are weaned, they end up at auctions where other commercial breeders are ready to bid on them. Of course these dogs have not had proper care, socialization, or health issues addressed. Some may be emotionally traumatized by neglect and/or abuse. In some cases they may already have cancer, tumors, severe dental disease, bad hips, knees, heart conditions, or even missing toes because they chewed them off when they became infected from standing in wire crates for so long.

Did our rescue buy auction dogs? No. Historically, if you look back, NWS4L Rescue never asked for money to purchase puppy mill dogs. However, we organized on behalf of supporters and bought them with personal funds that came from our board members, reputable breeders, and our closest friends and family who wanted to participate. We also supported those who did ask for money.

You may not agree, and I respect your right to have an opinion, but it is up to everyone's individual conscience to decide if it is right or wrong. These are innocent animals that did not ask to live this way. Rescuers want to relieve the pain and the suffering.

Some auctions occurred because a commercial breeder was shut down by the authorities, other times it was just a normal routine time to go to auction to turn over stock before the week were left out in low-temperature conditions and might die with no profit made. We bought seniors and puppies. Seniors touched our hearts, and we wanted to end the painful breeding cycle.

We had one senior, 10-years old, and when she arrived, she walked out of her kennel but lifted her paws when they touched grass; it was an alien sensation.



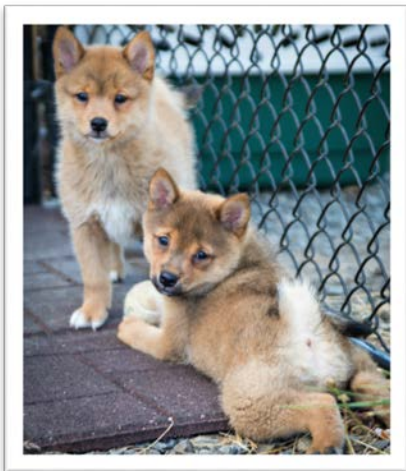
When I put her on concrete or dirt she was fine. Once she adjusted to the grass, she dragged her bed out onto it, her toys out onto it, and we put her food bowl there because it brought her great joy! We named her Joy!

At one auction we bought the last puppies that were left at the end. When the puppies arrived, all but one was happy to race out of the kennel. One little pup was unsure of the unknowns outside the crate. She waited in her kennel. Peeking out the front door. I picked her up and cuddled her close, and we watched the other pups play. Over time, I put her down, but she would come back to me time and time again and stand around my ankles. She had to be assured that I was close by. She wanted to play but didn't know how to inject herself into the pack. I grouped her with the more passive puppies first and then she slowly began to play, but if she was unsure she would race back to me. I played with the other puppies, too, to reassure her I was close by and to teach her that playtime was fun. Eventually, she played with all the puppies and loved it! Her name is Jazzy! The overwhelming emotion of knowing these Shibas got out of this hellish environment is one of the examples of what rescue means to me.

Rescue exists primarily because of commercial breeders. Rescue can be a good partnership with reputable breeders who love their dogs and want what's best for them. I have Shiba breeder friends who want to know when we come across their dogs. Some know it's their dog by the dog's specific looks. When we came across one of their dogs, we were always happy to partner together to rehome the dog. Both breeders and rescues have resources, and rescue is a new perspective on a permanent home with different applicants. I applaud those who breed for sound temperament and AKC standards. However, not all breeders do the right thing.

Ten years ago, our rescue took in six dogs from a reputable breeder who had no back-up plan. A decade prior to this she was known as being one of the best in the Northwest and had beautiful Shiba females and males. However, as her health went downhill, she had way too many dogs and not enough help, and soon one by one the dogs were neglected. Eventually some of her breeding stock was sold and bought by a variety of people. Buyers bred her superior breeding stock with commercial dogs.

Years later her health became worse, and when she passed away there were neglected Shibas still in her care.



Volunteers had to step in and remove the dogs. It was sad. I know it was not her intent; she loved her dogs.

When I began rescue, the Shiba rescue community was more unified. I became good friends with people in Florida, Arizona, Midwest, Utah, Reno, and California. We had a strong network, shared information and resources, and worked together to put the dogs first. As Shiba Rescue grew over many years, some people retired from it, and some passed away. Those that are still active and successful are highly committed individuals who have great support and have made rescue their lifetime endeavor. I applaud their commitment to not only their selfless service, but their desire to do right by each animal they rescue.

I support most rescues, but I would not recommend all rescues. I am only comfortable recommending a rescue if I or someone close to me has personally visited the rescue and seen how they operate and the condition of the animals. I have seen pictures of volunteers who have dogs in their dirty garages and volunteers who tell me they continue to risk dogs being removed from their care because they are breaking laws by having too many animals on their property. I do not support these rescues. I do not support inadequate care.

I have a friend who is a supervisor of a Puppy Mill Task Force for an animal organization. Her job is to go in and seize dogs in situations where they are receiving inadequate care. When she asked for help, I volunteered; my friend had another friend of hers, someone who also ran a rescue for Poms, who also volunteered. The Task Force donated \$500 to the Pom Rescue because the woman was so passionate about the Task Force work. Three months later there was a seizure at the residence of the Pom Rescue. It turns out that the woman had too many dogs, and they were neglected and suffering. It wasn't a rescue—it was a hoarding situation that was out of hand. The Task Force was in the news; its donation to the Pom Rescue came to light suggesting the donation was made without proper due diligence because there was a conflict of interest between friends.

My advice to people is that if you don't care where your money goes, then keep donating in good faith. If you want your donation to be effective, do the research and/or go visit in person if they have a facility or home base for

operations. I want all rescues to receive financial support but we live in a world where GoFundMe will go fund me anything I want, and everyone is a close friend on social media. Those two factors don't mean the animals get what you are donating.



For all of you researching this breed, viewing the cute videos, and laughing at the antics please be your worst critic on the decision as to whether or not the breed is right for you. This rare breed is a domesticated wolf. They're not a happy-go-lucky Lab, and can be very stubborn and develop aggressions against food, toys, other dogs, and children. Shibas require exercise, training, and strong pack leadership skills. Shibas are dying in shelters, humane societies,

puppy mills, and out on the streets every day because owners dropped them off, stopped looking for lost dogs, or just believed somebody good had found them. When you rehome your Shiba it's a huge change and stressful. If you buy or adopt, you owe your Shiba a lifetime family commitment.

The neglect and/or abandonment that I have seen has weighed heavy on my heart. Before you shop or adopt you have the opportunity to make a difference and walk away. Become a Shibaholic and support the breed, laugh and enjoy the breed, but do not bring home the breed if you are not the right match.

After seventeen years it's time for me to move on to the next chapter of my life with my family, friends, and career. My first Shiba Inu, Fuji just passed away at the age of 16.5; he was the inspiration for our rescue; he was there for the beginning, there for more than 500 rescued Shiba Inus, and there almost until the very last days. Fuji was the most perfect Shiba with the best variety of challenges, training, and antics. He brought joy to our entire family, every day.



Although we shut our doors on October 1, we will continue to search for perfect homes for the adoptable few dogs left. The legal process to shut down the 501c3 will take us sixty days. Then, we will be taking a break and appreciating a holiday season full of vacations and gatherings with family and friends.

In the beginning I was told rescue did not define me and that I was only human. Well, in fact, rescue did define me; I served as a protector, spoke on their behalf, and was Mama D. My transition to the next step in my life won't be easy, so I ask you to understand that I may not be online as much. I need to take a step back and breathe to take a step forward.

By January 2017 we will re-invent our website to provide future resources to people interested in Shibas; it will include education and resources. I want to thank our Board of Directors: Jean MacTarnahan, Kendra Schuett, and Kathy Oppenheimer for your passion, support, humor, patience, and diligent work! We are truly bonded for life over this experience, and I love you dearly with all of my heart. I want to also thank my dearest friends: Kathy Centracchio, Malachi's mom, Martha Silver, Julie Schmitz, Leni Doyle-Hickman, Elaine Byrnes, Cathy Stern, Sara Teeter, Serena Russell, Brooke Mathews, Mimi Gomes, Carol Titus, Charlotte Cline, Laura Perkinson, and SFNC for always volunteering to help us with fundraising and promoting our special dogs. Our friendships go beyond rescue. I also want to thank all of our supporters who shared, donated, and adopted our angels. You are forever in my heart. I am asking you to reach out to Shibas.org and ShibaProm.org for guidance, resources, and next steps because they are incredible people who truly need to hear the demand for help needed.

Lastly, I only wish I could reach out to every one of you and give you a hug for what you have shared with me, taught me, and the treasures you have provided me to let me know how much you care. I wish each and every one of you happiness, good health, strength, and success in everything you do.

Shiba Yodels and Human Hugs,

Denise Roelke

Founder and President
NW Shibas4Life Rescue

