

Journey was pregnant when she was dumped at a high-kill shelter in California. Eugene-based Luvable Dog Rescue saved her just hours before she was due to be euthanized, together with her unborn puppies.

Months later and miles from that crowded shelter, Journey and her puppies have been living at Luvable's dog haven in the south hills and have had their portraits done wearing crowns of flowers by famed photographer Sophie Gamand.

Gamand and Luvable's executive director, Liesl Wilhardt, hope that Gamand's soft and sweet portraits will help maligned pit bulls like Journey find their forever homes through the magic of the photos and social media. Gamand made a trip to Eugene in June to photograph the dogs of Luvable.

Gamand, who is from France and lives in New York, first went viral when she published her photos of wet dogs — portraits of pups wet, wiggly and vulnerable at bath time. Those portraits were later published as a book, *Wet Dog*, in 2015. Gamand went even more viral in the summer of 2014 when, taking a break from wet dog portraits, she began to put flower crowns on pit bulls, which kicked off her Flower Power, Pit Bulls of the Revolution portraits.

Gamand tells *EW* that when she was 12 or 13 she was attacked by a large dog. While the dog that attacked her was a breed of French herding dog called a briard, she says that later, when she was volunteering in shelters and staff would bring the pit bulls on to her photo set, "I would tense up, and not engage too much."

But then, Gamand says, "One day, I decided to confront these apprehensions and find out the truth for myself. Were pit bulls crazy, unpredictable and dangerous? Or were they just dogs? That's what started Flower Power. As soon as the first images came out, in the summer 2014, it went viral, and I was propelled into the role of a pit bull advocate."

Wilhardt says that Gamand understands the "challenges faced by shelters and volunteers." She understands, Wilhardt says, "how hard it is to find these guys homes" and is committed to telling the stories of the dogs. Gamand looks at the dog as an individual, and goes that extra mile to give background history when she posts a dog photo on social media, showing with her words and photography what's special and what kind of home it needs, she says.

Gamand had to go almost 3,000 or so extra miles to come to Eugene from her New York home. Wilhardt says one of Luvable's many hardworking volunteers, Sandy Bezelj, suffers from a heart condition and is not able to leave her bed for more than an hour or two. So she helps the nonprofit out on social media such as Instagram. Bezelj reached out to Gamand on Instagram, Wilhardt says, and Gamand wrote "a sweet note" back. But Gamand wasn't sure she could pull off the trip to Oregon from New York.

A few weeks later a Luvable Dog Rescue benefactor, Tony Low-Ber, hired Gamand for a private commission of portraits of his own five rescued pit bulls. He lives relatively near her in Connecticut, Wilhardt says.

Low-Ber is 73 years old and rescued his pit bulls from his local shelters after becoming a volunteer. Low-Ber also suggested that Gamand make the trip to Oregon to visit Luvable and then offered to pay for the travel expenses for her and for her husband to assist with all the equipment and materials.

While Gamand was in Eugene, Luvable had a party with her and the rescue's staff and volunteers, but Bezelj's illness meant she couldn't get out of bed to attend, so Gamand and her husband took the time out of their whirlwind three-day trip to drop by her house. "This woman goes way beyond simply making art," Wilhardt says.

Many of Gamand's pit bull models, like many of Luvable's pups, come from tragic beginnings. Wilhardt points to Luvable's resident mascots Pika, a French bulldog, and Wombat, a deaf pit bull, as examples

Pika, whose Instagram handle is *Pika_outofthe_hole*, was found living in a filthy hole in the ground covered in plywood. She now lives at Luvable and has more than 10,000 people on Instagram following her antics. Wombat had his ears mutilated in a home crop-job that left him with chronic ear infections requiring several surgeries at Oregon State University that finally freed him from pain, but left him deaf.

Wilhardt says in her 17-year experience doing pit bull rescue "it really is part of their genetic make up for them to be good with people." Dogs like Wombat are emblematic of the pit bull's ability to "forgive whatever cruelty they experienced at the hands of humans and be open to the possibility of life being different and better."

She adds, "Some dogs are just better at letting go of the past than others, and pit bulls are really willing to live in the moment and trust people again."

Gamand says that since starting Flower Power, "I have often questioned the validity of my project: Are pit bulls more dangerous than other dogs? Is it OK to promote their adoption? Am I being irresponsible?"

She says, "I got lots of hate mail at some point. People would write me to tell me I had blood on my hands. It was not pretty. But in the two years that I have been working on Flower Power, I have photographed over 250 pit bulls with flower crowns. I have met countless pit bull owners living safely and happily with pit bulls, even with cats, kids, other dogs. Judging the entire group 'pit bull' based on their look and supposed breed association is ludicrous and narrow-minded."

Gamand continues, "And when you see what bad people do to pit bulls on a daily basis, and the kind of abuse these sweet dogs go through, you cannot just ignore their fate any longer. I always say: It's not about whether or not you like pit bulls. It's about the kind of humane society we want to be. Do we want to euthanize between 800,000 and 1 million pit bulls every year, for no other reason than our own fears and shortcomings?"

Gamand says that during her trip to Luvable, "I was particularly touched by Journey's story." A pregnant pit bull at a high intake/high kill shelter doesn't have a lot of

options. The shelters often have to "euthanize pregnant females," she says, "because it takes a lot of resources to take care of a mom and her litter." Shelters need money, space — a dedicated quarantine area — and around-the-clock care for the pups, she points out, and "these shelters don't have that kind of luxury."

Two weeks after being pulled to safety, Journey had seven healthy puppies. "I crowned them all while I was there, and they are my youngest Flower Power models to date!" Gamand says. Journey's puppies, with names such as Wander, Galavant and Gypsy, are also up for adoption.

On the other end of the age spectrum are Choco and Indie, a pair of 11-year-old pit bulls that were abandoned at the shelter because their owner was in the military and couldn't keep them when he deployed overseas. "It broke my heart," Wilhardt says. In her description of the pittie pair for Instagram, Gamand writes, "Indie and Choco look like two old friends/grandmas checking out the hot young dudes on the beach." Despite their age, Wilhardt says they are very adoptable, in excellent health and tolerant of other dogs. Choco and Indie were Gamand's first dual portrait, she says.

Wilhardt points out that anyone who adopts one of the dogs featured in a Gamand portrait can also get, and treasure, the portrait of the dog. Gamand is running a fundraiser selling of her portraits in prints and on canvas through July 1 with 50 percent of the proceeds going to Luvable.

Wilhardt says one thing that has dramatically changed the ability of groups like Luvable to network, adopt out and fundraise for dogs in need is social media. Gamand herself has 130,000 Instagram followers commenting on her portraits of shelter dogs. "I don't know what people in rescue did before Facebook and Instagram," Wilhardt says. "Animal rescue in general has reached a whole new level through social media, the whole process has been enabled so much through the internet and social media. How did we do this before? You can tell a story in 15 seconds."

The popularity of Gamand's portraits on social media changed her life too. "Wet Dog was my first project to go viral, and it made my career," she says. "For the first time in my life, I was able to earn a living with my art. It was amazing." She's put that popularity to use photographing shelter dogs and helping the pups get homes.

"To be able to live from your art, and have your art be meaningful, it's the most amazing feeling in the world," Gamand says. Photographing dogs, either "naked" or with the crowns she carefully constructs is a way to help her understand humans better. "What dogs teach me, and especially shelter dogs, is that compassion is key," she says. "Without compassion, we will hurt each other again and again. The cycle of violence ends where compassion starts. I am still working on that." ■

You can find Sophie Gamand on Instagram at @SophieGamand and on her website SophieGamand.com. To find out more about Luvable and the dogs for adoption — which include small breeds such as Chihuahuas and terriers in addition to pits — go to luvabledogrescue.org.

CONNOR LOOKS FOR A HOME

SOPHIE GAMAND WITH HER YOUNGEST MODELS

PREGNANT JOURNEY WAS SAVED FROM EUTHANASIA

