

AN ODE TO 'AN UNFAILINGLY GOOD DOG'



Lacey Hoyer/The Daily Astorian

Una takes protecting the garden (and all its delicious food) very seriously.

By LACEY HOYER
The Daily Astorian

It's summer, finally. The days are long, the nights are warm and the flowers are blooming.

I always spend a lot of time during this season watering the garden and Una, my 13-year-old border collie/blue heeler mix, likes to be there by my side.

I'd like to say it's purely because she loves me, but I know she has an ulterior motive. What Una's really after is fresh food. She will stealthily nose among the sugar snap peas searching for plump pods to clip between her teeth and eat. She does the same thing with tomatoes, strawberries, apples and blackberries. She only takes the ripe ones, and she only does it when she thinks I'm not looking. This isn't the first summer I've gardened with Una by my side, however. I know exactly what she's up, and used to chase her away with stern admonitions. But this summer, more and more, I find myself pretending not to notice.



Lacey Hoyer

She has, after all, spent the last nine years being an unfailingly good dog.

We got Una when she was already 4 years old. We were living in Roseburg at the time with four cats and a rambunctious puppy, and we hadn't wanted or needed another pet. I don't know what brought us to the animal shelter that day in late September, but for whatever reason we found ourselves walking down the long row of chain-link and cement-block cages and frantically barking Chihuahuas, pit bulls and lab mixes.

She was sitting politely by the door of the very last cage, silent while the other dogs were loudly trying to get my attention. As soon as I laid eyes on her, the hairs on my arms stood up and I heard a voice screaming in my head, "That is your dog! Get her out of that cage and bring her home!" I crouched down and stuck my fingers through the fence, and her tail thumped softly while she smelled me. She raised her bright, keen eyes to mine and gently licked me.

Without speaking, my husband and I both knew our family wouldn't be complete without her. She knew sit, and stay, and heel — she was the most well-mannered and beautiful dog we'd ever seen. As we filled out the paperwork to take her home, we asked the attendants why no one had adopted her yet. They didn't know. All they

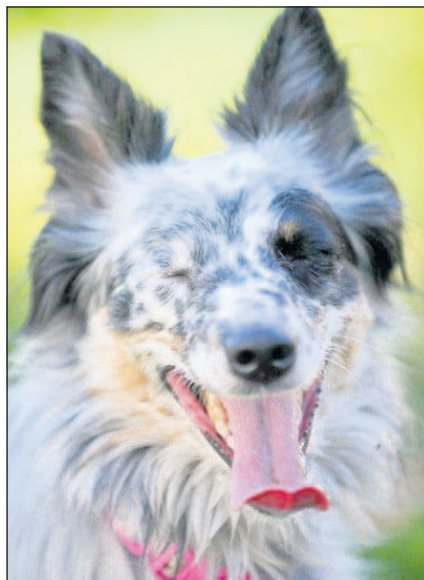


Photo Courtesy of Robin Loznak

Una

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**Writer's
Notebook**

did know was that she'd been in the shelter a month already, picked up without a collar along a road dotted by farms and ranches, and was slated to be euthanized in the next day or two. We surmised she must have been waiting just for us, and all three smiled with relief at such a close call as we headed out the doors to home.

Una's first official act as our dog was to appoint herself the protector of the family. This has meant, through the years, mostly chasing neighbor cats out of the yard and barking ferociously at the UPS man.

I know, however, that in her heart she is a bold, courageous and dutiful dog, and that she would not hesitate to protect us from an actual threat. Just a few months ago, Avery, my oldest daughter, went to help a neighbor wash his car while I watched from my porch. Una didn't know the man, and she was not comfortable with him and Avery being so close together without me there. She flew down the street and positioned herself between them — eyes flashing and snarling menacingly at our poor neighbor — and herded Avery home.

Despite being a good dog, Una isn't always a perfect dog. She is sometimes distant and proud.

We refer to her our "schoolmarm" because she cannot abide it when people or other animals have too much noisy fun. She has garnered a reputation as a connoisseur of kitty litter and dirty diapers. More than once in our many years with her, she has come home from an adventure in the woods caked in mud and swamp sludge, and reeking of something long dead.

She is most affectionate after killing and eating rodents and snakes — she'll climb onto our laps, look deep into our eyes and attempt to French kiss us. And of course she has that sly propensity to pluck and eat the ripe vegetables in the garden before I've had a chance to.

I've been mad at her more times than I can count, but there have been many more times when I felt like she was the only real friend I had in the world.

When I was a new mother and suffering from postpartum depression, she would sympathetically lick the tears rolling down my cheeks while I cried into her fur in the early hours of the morning. She's listened patiently as I've told her my dreams, my grievances, my fears. Like all good dogs, she never judges.

Sometimes, after rooting in the litter box or barking excessively for no good reason, I remind her how lucky she is that I decided to go to the shelter that day so many years ago. I say it, even though I know for a fact that I'm the real lucky one.

This is Una's 13th summer, and most likely her last good one. Despite the warm temperatures, her arthritis has begun flaring up. She is stiff and her joints creak alarmingly when she gets up from the floor. Opaque clouds are blooming in her eyes and the black spots on her muzzle and ears have suddenly started turning gray. She doesn't go on long expeditions in the forest anymore, preferring to nap in a sunny spot close by the house.

These days, while picking peas or any of the other fruit Una likes, I always make sure to drop a handful on the ground for her to find. She gobbles them up with gladness, and I am happy to give them. I know that summer and its fruit, like the life of a good dog, won't last long.

Or at least not nearly long enough.

Lacey Hoyer manages to squeeze in time working at Clatsop Community College and The Daily Astorian in between parenting her two spunky children. A graduate of the University of Oregon, she lives in Hammond. You can read more about Hoyer and Una's adventures on her website at www.sproutandsprig.com



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