



PHOTO: Don Hughes, advocate for animal welfare, shares his inspiring journey from politics to fostering trust and compassion in rescue dogs.

From Policy to Paws

DON HUGHES

Navigating the World of Animal Rescue and Advocacy

Don Hughes, transitioning from politics to animal rescue, shares insights on fostering trust, overcoming challenges, and the transformative power of companionship.

Embarking on a journey from the intricacies of political science to the tender realm of animal rescue is not a conventional path, but for Don Hughes, it became an enriching odyssey. Graduating from the University of Illinois and later Harvard University, Don carved a distinguished career in state politics and public policy, particularly in healthcare and insurance. However, in 2017, the course of his life took a remarkable turn when he found his calling

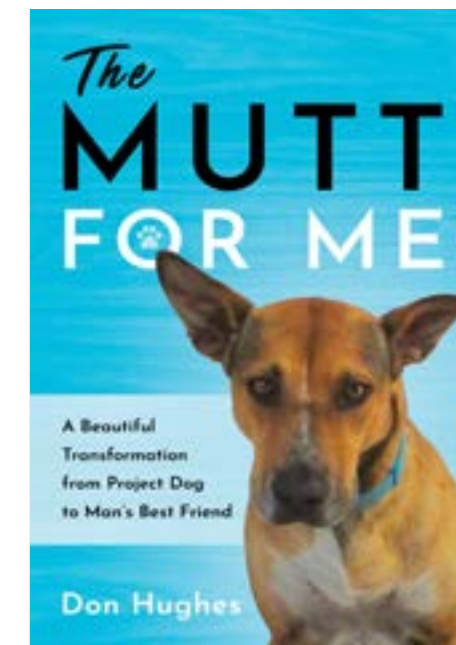
at the Maricopa County Animal Shelter in Phoenix, Arizona. Living amidst the desert hues with his steadfast companion, Barbie, Don's story is one of profound transformation and unwavering dedication. His memoir, "The Mutt for Me," delves into the intricate journey of nurturing Barbie, a rescue

dog fraught with behavioral challenges. Through patience, understanding, and boundless compassion, Don navigated the complexities of earning Barbie's trust, unraveling layers of fear to reveal the resilient spirit within. In an exclusive interview with Reader's House Magazine, Don sheds light on his motivations

and experiences, offering invaluable insights into the world of animal rescue and the profound bond between humans and their four-legged companions. From the initial apprehension to the joyful moments of playfulness, Don's narrative resonates with the universal truth of resilience and the transformative power of companionship.

As Don recounts his journey, he encapsulates the essence of empathy and perseverance, urging others to embark on similar paths

"The Mutt for Me" by Don Hughes chronicles the heartwarming journey of nurturing Barbie, a rescue dog, amidst challenges and triumphs.



of compassion and advocacy for animals in need. Through his lens, the parallels between public policy and animal welfare become evident, highlighting the importance of communication, patience, and steadfast commitment in effecting positive change.

Join us as we delve into the heartwarming narrative of Don Hughes, a testament to the enduring bond between man and his faithful canine companion, and the profound impact of love, patience, and understanding in shaping lives, both human and animal alike.

Don, your journey from political campaigns to public policy and finally to volunteering at an animal shelter is quite remarkable. What inspired this shift in focus, particularly towards working with rescue animals?

In 2013, I began dating a woman who had five rescue dogs and ran a private shelter in Prescott, Arizona. Jenny opened my eyes to the world of animal rescue including the abuse we humans inflict on dogs and cats and just how terrific rescue dogs are. I began contributing financially to her rescue and others. I knew the money was needed and well spent; I began questioning whether just giving money was

Don Hughes embodies empathy, resilience, and unwavering dedication, illuminating the transformative bond between humans and their four-legged companions.

enough. If we want to make the world a better place, we have an obligation to give of ourselves and not just write a check.

Volunteering as an adoption counselor at our County Shelter, was the most rewarding and heartbreaking thing I've ever done. It would make me question my faith in humanity and restore it, often in the same day. While I can't change the world, finding a good home for a dog or cat, I can change their world.

Your memoir, The Mutt for Me, chronicles your experiences with Barbie, a behaviourally difficult rescue dog. Can you share a bit about the challenges you faced and the lessons you learned while helping Barbie overcome her fears and anxieties?

When I first met Barbie, she was afraid of everything, especially men. She had been brought in as a stray and had spent three months in the Shelter. The first time I met her, Barbie was curled up in a tight ball in the furthest corner of her kennel, hoping no one would notice her. When I looked into her eyes, there was no spark, no hope, just despair.

Barbie was afraid of men; the biggest challenge was simply gaining her trust. At first, Barbie did not want to be in the same room with me and would not eat or drink if I was in the kitchen. Through structure, walks and food, slowly, she began to trust me. The first slight tail wag at the door for our morning walk was a huge step forward.

Barbie had never been inside a house before, so house training was a big challenge. Before it didn't matter where she went, but now it did. Teaching her what I wanted from her was a major challenge for both of us. For every step forward, we seemed to take two steps back. Our communication improved, once I paid attention

to bow, she was letting me know what she needed.

Adopting a rescue dog can be both rewarding and challenging. What advice would you give to others considering adopting a rescue animal, especially one with behavioural issues?

I would tell potential adopters not to expect the dog to be happy and playful the minute the dog enters your home. The Shelter is a scary place, going into a strange new environment is also scary. Be patient, remember the rule of 3. Three days for your new dog to decompress, three weeks before she learns your routine and three months before they finally settled in and feel comfortable in their new home.

Patience is key. There is a great dog hidden behind their fear just waiting to come out. All that behaviorally challenged dog needs is someone who's willing to try. The reward is well worth the hard work, the tears and sleepless nights.

Throughout your career in public policy, you've tackled various challenges in areas like health care and insurance. How do you see your experiences in policy shaping your approach to caring for animals and advocating for their well-being?

The communication skills

needed to be effective in shaping public policy translate easily to caring and advocating for animals. Listening to what the adopter was looking for in a pet, asking the right questions, clearly explaining the dog's history and potential problems, ensuring that everyone in the family knew adopting a dog is a lifetime commitment. Not rushing the initial meeting.

These are basically the same steps in being an effective lobbyist or policy advocate.

Your memoir highlights the transformative power of the human-animal bond. Can you share a specific moment or experience with Barbie that particularly stands out to you as emblematic of this bond?

One night, I was working in my home office when I heard a commotion coming from the living room. When I went out to check on what was going on, I found Barbie was playing! She gave me her first play bow since she moved in. We played hide and seek; she loved finding me hiding in the bathroom or the laundry room. This was the first time in two months that Barbie played. She was finally learning to be a dog again. Seeing her transform from the scared dog who had given up on life to being so happy and playful made it all worthwhile.