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Reuniting best pals

A gift brings a youth and his beloved dog together again

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SCOTIA -- Nathan Grier had problems in math, problems in science, problems socializing -- problems that, as bad as they were, seemed to disappear the minute he went home to his 2-year-old pit bull, Booger.

They were inseparable friends living in Ocala, Fla. Booger accompanied 13-year-old Nathan to the bathroom and shower. They even slept in the same bed, Nathan nestled under the covers, Booger flat on his back, nose pointed, all four legs extended toward the ceiling.

It was a perfect relationship.

Then it was over.

In September, Nathan's mother, Bonnie, who grew up in Schenectady, talked her husband, Steve, into moving to New York state. She knew the schools were equipped for helping students like Nathan, who has a learning disability. In Florida, he spent most of his school days confused, with his forehead on his desk.

However, the family was flying and couldn't afford the \$1,000 price tag for transporting Booger. Bonnie works as an aide for the elderly and Steve is an unemployed electrician.

The effect on Nathan, however, couldn't be measured in fiscal terms. In his world, where not much came easy, his relationship with Booger was a breeze. It made sense.

Nathan took the move hard, screaming hysterically when Booger was dragged away on a leash.

The separation wasn't much easier for Booger. His new home would be safe and full of love, the Griers thought. Instead, he ended up in what resembled the pooch version of a bad prison.

He was hardly fed. Water was a rarity. And fleas infested his tan-and-white body, gnawing holes in his ears that are visible today, even after repeated doses of Neosporin. After nearly a month, Booger broke a window to get outside.

But he was scared to jump. So he stood at the window frame until a friend of the Griers happened to drive past and saw him surrounded by broken glass. The friends knocked on the door then went inside to find the house had been abandoned. Booger had been abandoned.

The friends took Booger home in October. He had been an inside dog with the Griers but became an outside dog with his newest caretakers. It was better than being abandoned. Still, Booger needed his buddy. He needed Nathan.

Nathan began to flourish at Scotia Middle School. With the help of educators like social worker Jessica Brennan, he raised his average in math from a 30 to a 93. Nathan had been placed in classes that are tailored to his ability, and suddenly, the numbers began to add up.

He answered questions. He handed his homework in on time. He no longer sat in class with his forehead on his desk. But he wasn't happy. Booger was 1,200 miles away.

Nathan talked about Booger the first time he met with Brennan, and continued to retell Booger stories every time they spoke. One thing, it seemed, allowed the shy boy to open up and reveal his thoughts. Brennan listened and listened some more. Then she had an idea: Why not bring Booger to New York?

Brennan logged onto her computer at home one night and Googled "pet charities and Florida." A few organizations popped up and she e-mailed each one. She received two responses. One told her to hold a fundraiser. The other, Pet Together, asked for more information.

She explained the situation and in early December, Pet Together agreed to pay the expenses to send Booger north. He needed immunizations, flight papers and transportation to and from the airport.

As it turns out, Pet Togethers isn't normally in the make-a-wish-come-true business.

It's a pet supplement company.

On Dec. 29, Pet Togethers employees loaded Booger into a crate and onto a plane at Tampa International Airport. He arrived in Albany at 4 p.m. and was placed in a van. About an hour later, the van rolled up to the curb in front of the Grier home.

Nathan knew a package was coming. The contents of that package, however, had been a mystery.

"Nathan, something's here for you," Bonnie said as Nathan looked out the window.

He ran outside, looked in the van, and was too stunned to say anything. Booger was skinnier than Nathan had ever seen him. But Booger was still Booger, and he licked Nathan's face through the bars of the cage.

Nathan began to cry as he embraced Booger. Over the next few hours, the doorbell rang almost constantly, as Nathan's friends, who had all heard about Booger, stopped by to meet the dog.

In the days since, Booger has begun the process of acclimating to his new environment. He hates the cold and refuses to set foot in snow. But he still follows Nathan into the bathroom. They're still inseparable. And Booger still sleeps with his feet skyward.

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