



Gina's Journey

BY LYN T. GARSON, CVT, CCRP

Gina disappeared. The Shih-Tzu-Doodle mixed breed pup was only two years old when she couldn't find her way back home. At first, her owners Rachael and James Garrison thought she was just visiting the neighbors again, like she had many times before. Gina loved playing outside and would often end up at different people's houses along the quiet road they live on in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

"She always was outside. When you'd open up the door, she zoomed out," explains Rachael.

However, the last time Gina left home was different. She never returned. "I think somebody nabbed her off the street and probably sold her," Rachael says. "She's a really good dog, soft and sweet, and she's friendly to everyone."

Rachael and James posted Gina's picture and information locally on Facebook, then waited. When no one brought Gina back, they called the facility where they had her microchipped to report that she was missing. Still nothing. Heartbroken, Rachael and James began to lose hope.

Gina was gone for three years. On a recent snowy day in Arkansas, this past January, Rachael received a phone call from an unfamiliar out-of-state number. "I was just totally shocked when I got that phone call," Rachael says.

The caller identified herself as Heather Raco, the founder of Whiskers Fund Animal Rescue, a 100% foster-based rescue for dogs and cats with medical needs who are often pulled from overcrowded high-kill shelters. Heather shared a surprising tale about Gina that Rachael couldn't imagine. Still more unbelievable was where that call came from – Ooltewah, Tennessee – nearly seven hundred miles away.

Gina's adventures landed her on the streets of Tennessee, wandering by

herself. Until one night, as if by magic, a cascade of angels intervened.

The first angel was a woman who spotted Gina and plucked her from the traffic-filled road. Next, was the woman's daughter, an employee at The Animal Care Center of Ooltewah who knew exactly what to do. She scanned the area between Gina's shoulders, hoping to find a tiny microchip containing a unique identification number linked to contact information for Gina's owner. The scanner beeped. Within seconds a code number lit up the screen.

The Animal Care Center's practice manager became the third angel, when she contacted her friend Heather Raco, at Whiskers Fund. When Heather, the fourth angel, learned that Rachael's medical issues prevented her from traveling the 10-hour drive to pick Gina up, she immediately decided to use her wings to make a reunion possible. It turns out that Heather is earning her private pilot's license. She promised to personally fly Gina home, all the way from Tennessee to Arkansas.



Meanwhile, still more angels banded together to prepare Gina for her journey home. Foster mom Carrie attended to Gina's daily needs. Groomer Amy styled an adorable "puppy cut" makeover. Dr. John Mullins and his team of veterinary professionals treated Gina's painful ear infection and her flea infestation, paving the way for a healthy future. His hospital covered the costs of treatments, medications, vaccines, heartworm testing, and routine preventatives.

Stars had aligned for Gina. One last hurdle stood in her way of returning home: back-to-back snowstorms first hit Arkansas, then the following week, Tennessee. "The weather was so crazy," Rachael says. "We didn't know when Heather was going to be able to bring her home."

Nearly one month later, Heather was cleared to fly. "The flight itself went great. Gina is an absolute doll," says Heather. "Rachael's husband and granddaughter met me at the airport to get her. It took about twenty seconds for Gina to realize that was her dad, but her tail went wild when she figured it out. It was a very sweet moment."

After three years, her whole family is reunited. "She's brightened up the house," Rachael says. "We started out with a pretty rough year. When we got Gina back you could just tell the whole dynamic was up. Everybody feels better because Gina's home. It seemed like she was the one good thing that we needed that made it better for everybody."

Gina isn't allowed to go outside alone anymore. Her new mode of travel is by car. "She jumps right up on the seat. She knows she wants to go somewhere," Rachael says.

Rachael reflects back on a time when Gina was a puppy, how an act of kindness made possible her return home all these years later. "They had a 'free microchip day' here, so you could imagine how busy it was. A neighbor friend stood out in line all day long and got my dog microchipped. She was nice enough to do that for me. I appreciate that so much right now."

Heather hopes that Gina's journey highlights the importance of routine microchipping and scanning. "This is such a massive reminder of just how important it is to make sure pets are microchipped and information is up to date. Those of us in the veterinary industry should be scanning all pets when they come in, making sure the animal is registered, or actually belongs to the people who brought it in. Pet theft is incredibly common, I wonder how much sooner Gina could have been reunited [with her family] if someone had scanned her."

Yet another angel concludes this magical story. Gina, who came to Rachael at eight weeks old, was a gift from Rachael's sister's best friend since childhood. "She had it in her heart to send me this puppy," Rachael remembers. "She told me she named her Gina, for my sister who passed away." 🐾



MICROCHIP FACTS

- A microchip is about the size of a grain of rice
- Once administered, a microchip is permanent
- It is safe, non-toxic, and does not emit radiation
- A microchip cannot get lost like a collar tag
- It is designed to last the lifetime of your pet
- A microchip is not a tracking device
- It is injected under loose skin between the shoulder blades of a dog or cat
- The optimal age for pets to receive a microchip is at eight weeks and older
- Cats, especially, should be microchipped – even indoor cats
- The injection containing the microchip is slightly larger than a vaccine needle
- No anesthesia is required, so it can be administered during a routine office visit
- It also may be placed at the time of spaying, neutering, or other surgery
- Ensure your contact information with the microchip company is current
- Request that your veterinary office staff scan your pet's microchip annually