

Pet rescue turns into an air travel trial of patience

Adventure begins the moment you say yes to something new.

Not that Karen Winters of Cottage Grove was expecting quite so much adventure when she and her husband, Jim, decided to bring home from Texas a small rescue dog that had been abused.

Karen Winters, 64, is a licensed tax consultant who was in Waco in mid-November to visit a client who, along with his wife, shelters abused animals on their 150-acre ranch.

Jim took a particular liking to a Yorkshire terrier, Tuki, that had been freed from a puppy mill, where dogs are held strictly for breeding purposes.

“I’m looking at him like, ‘You’re nuts,’” Karen Winters says. “We already have a dog.”

But she realized how upset Jim was about the abuse of Tuki. Oregon restricts such breeding operations; Texas does not. A 5-year-old dog such as Tuki might have given birth to 10 litters of puppies in that short life.

So, there was Karen Winters taking Tuki through the TSA scanner at Waco Regional Airport to begin a Dallas-Portland-Eugene trip home. (Jim had medical equipment to check through, thus the decision to have Karen take the dog.)

The alarm sounded.

“‘Sorry,’ they told me, ‘we’re going to have to pat you down,’” Karen Winters says.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she replied.

An agent asked if she had put something on her hands. Yes, she said, hand lotion, at 6 a.m.; it was now 4 p.m. And besides, she told them, she had just washed her hands “using your soap and your water.”

Gloves on, two female TSA agents took her to a side room, with Tuki, and patted Winters down. “They don’t miss an inch of your body,” she says.

Next, the agents took off their gloves to have them scanned for any suspicious residue they might have picked up.

The alarm sounded again.

An agent called the Waco Police Department. Tuki whimpered. Winters started worrying about missing her flight.

She was told that her husband and the dog might have to proceed without her.

A police officer arrived to question her. Who was she? What was she doing in Texas? Where was she going?

“Then I’m told, ‘We’re going to have to run your name through the FBI database.’”

Finally, she was cleared for takeoff.

Winters later surmised that the scanners were triggered by glycerine-infused powder put on Tuki by a veterinarian — and transferred to Karen when she held the dog.

But this journey wasn't over. While the couple waited in Dallas for their Portland connection, an airline agent told them they could not sit in their first-class front-row seat. The dog needed to be under the seat in front of them and the front row, of course, has only a wall in front of it.

Winters simmered. Until, that is, a man stepped forward after an agent asked for two volunteers in first-class to switch places.

"I never fly first-class but my wife and I had gone to see our son in London and she wanted to go first-class because of the length of the trip," says Akin Blitz, a Portland attorney.

When Blitz volunteered to switch places — with his wife's permission — all he knew was that the move was necessitated by a dog. It was only later, talking to Karen on the flight, that he learned of Tuki's history. And she learned of his: He was on the Oregon Humane Society's board of trustees.

"At the gate in Dallas she'd been fairly frustrated," says Blitz, who trains therapy dogs and, in 2012, won the society's "Animal Advocate" award. "When I heard the whole story, I was delighted that a businesswoman with a whole lot on her agenda would travel thousands of miles, and through airports, to take this dog home."

But Winters wasn't home yet.

In Portland, waiting for her Eugene connection, she heard her name on the loudspeaker. "Passenger Karen Winters to the counter. Karen Winters."

What now?

A \$100 pet fee hadn't been collected in Waco; she would need to pony up before she got on the Portland-to-Eugene plane.

A weary Winters was willing — but a jammed computer wasn't.

After a supervisor spent 15 minutes trying to fix the computer — and hearing her story — he gave up.

"He said, 'You know, ma'am, you're taking a rescue dog. Let's forget the fee,'" Winters says.

Tuki is now safely in Cottage Grove, slowly relaxing and getting along well with the couple's other dog, Jasper.

Rumor has it that Karen and Jim will not be flying anywhere for Thanksgiving.

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