

The Heartbreak of Degenerative Myelopathy

Here is the story of Denise and Jim Hansen and their dog, Charles, whom they rescued. They provided him a life he could never have imagined. Unfortunately, Charles developed Degenerative Myelopathy, a disease much like Lou Gehrig's Disease in which the central nervous system is impaired to the point of paralysis followed by death. There is no known cure for DM, but there is a simple, inexpensive genetic test that can show the risk of DM in breeding pairs BEFORE puppies are born. Please read Charles' story:

Charles was rescued

In August 2015, we rescued Charles from Southern California and brought him to Alaska at six years old. He was abandoned in a field of foxtails before being saved by the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier Club of Southern California (SCWTCSC). His few remaining teeth were broken, he was thin, his hair was brown in many areas, his belly was very much discolored, and he was in pain.

Coming to Alaska meant a future of healing, fresh air, healthy food, crazy wheaten playmates and finally the "24/7" love Charles deserved. His potential seemed endless! His first year was a period of learning how to trust people, settling into his new life, understanding what it meant to be a dog and getting healthy. Then for the next year Charles finally experienced the true joy of being a dog before signs of DM appeared. But in that one year I saw enough courage, determination, and strength to last me a lifetime.

A typical wheaten, a typical life, so what makes Charles' story so different? What makes this story so important to tell? It's how a typical life and story can change when you hear the words "degenerative myelopathy."

Charles' year of Degenerative Myelopathy begins

We first saw signs of Charles' lameness and dragging his back leg in November 2017 when we returned from my mother's funeral. Signs of Charles' lameness were evident on the snow-covered deck: three clear paw prints and a "drag."

But his personality was not diminished! Based on an exam, observations and x-rays, our veterinarian suspected diskospondylitis. Given his history with foxtails, this seemed like a plausible diagnosis. We treated him with powerful antibiotics and anti-inflammatories, restricted his activity, purchased a dog carriage so he could join his family on walks, and waited patiently for the suspected infection and inflammation to heal. We knew it was a six-to-eight-week treatment plan.

After six weeks, we saw no signs of improvement. By chance a wheaten mother in Canada, whose dog was tested positive for DM, recommended taking a DNA test for Degenerative Myelopathy - a simple (cheek swab), inexpensive (\$40-48) genetic test done through a laboratory. We opted to use DDC Veterinary; however, GenSol and Orthopedic Foundation for Animals offer saliva tests to screen for the mutated gene as well. On January 30, 2018 the test results came back "At Risk (2 copies of the DM mutation)". Our hearts sank but our hopes remained high.

The next step was to confer with a neurologist and have an MRI exclude all other possibilities. The newly created "Team Charles" went off to Seattle in March 2018.

All signs pointed to a generally healthy spine and the neurologist broke the sad news and prognosis to us. The words "no cure" hit us like a ton of bricks and ring in my head to this day. Rehab techniques such as hydrotherapy,

massage, and short but frequent walks were recommended to slow the progression of the disease. Ultimately a harness, some booties, and then a wheelchair would be required. The neurologist pointed out that each parent makes the decision at various stages of this disease where quality of life stops and when the parent has had “enough.” We were in it for the long run!

One day in early summer we noticed the lameness progressed to affect both back legs. The disease was spreading despite our efforts. His determination, spirit, energy, and positive attitude remained boundless! Because of Charles’ reactivity and the progression of the disease, he was in the harness 24/7. Living in the harness made it difficult to massage him, pet him, scratch his belly, and rolling over ceased to happen. While helpful for movement, elimination, and exercise, his life was changing. Behaviors often associated with a happy playful Wheaten were stripped away.

In July 2018 it was evident that Charles’ needed a wheelchair. His backend was completely paralyzed. After considerable research, we selected Eddies Wheels. We found them to have great experience with a focus on quality. Eddies Wheels is pricier than others, but Charles was worth it! Their products provided an added feature of adjustability when began to impact the front legs. We provided over two dozen measurements to Eddie’s Wheels and placed our order!

We had such high hopes that Charles would take to his wheels and gain a whole new lease on life! His mobility would allow him to run freely and be a dog! Fitting Charles into his new wheelchair required a trip to Anchorage and our friends at VSA. Charles was his usual reactive self so after a few hours, medication, cones, towels, two technicians and repeat attempts over two days, we had a good enough fit to return to Homer and continue introducing him to this contraption. This did not go well, so we prioritized Charles’ comfort and peace over the anxiety associated with the wheelchair.

We explored all avenues, we exhausted all possibilities, we were frustrated and disappointed that some options were not available to us; we did everything we could, and decided watching television, eating snack,s and loving Charles was a good life. And that good life continued until November 5, 2018. His front legs weakened, the sparkle in his eyes dimmed and his quality of life significantly diminished. Charles was ready to go and on the one-year anniversary of my Mothers passing, we set Charles free. The Big One, Backseat Barker, Charles Barkley barked the whole way to the Rainbow Bridge.

The good, the bad and the ugly of Degenerative Myelopathy

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You see your dog enjoying life, and then in a blink of an eye, you see ataxia or loss of coordination in his hind legs. Then his other hind leg drags only months later. Your dog is alert but wonders what is happening with his back end. CBD oil, lavender, and other over-the-counter supplements only slightly eased his anxiety. The struggle to move becomes more difficult. Your dog works so hard to motor and that takes a toll on his muscles. The cruel disease slowly progresses up his spine until he drops his front legs. There’s no easy mobility. Your dog becomes handicapped. His fate is sealed. Breathing becomes difficult and swallowing gets tougher. His bark goes from deep

and throaty to squeaky. Yes, DM even takes a dog's bark - the most fundamental of his communication and expression.

No breeder should ever want one of his/her puppies to experience even one horrific symptom of DM; no dog should ever experience that which is DM; no parent should ever have to endure the heartbreak of seeing their dog struggle with DM, especially when a simple, inexpensive, cheek swab test is available. I would appreciate the breeders adding that simple, inexpensive test to their responsible breeding practices. And to thank those who already do!!

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