

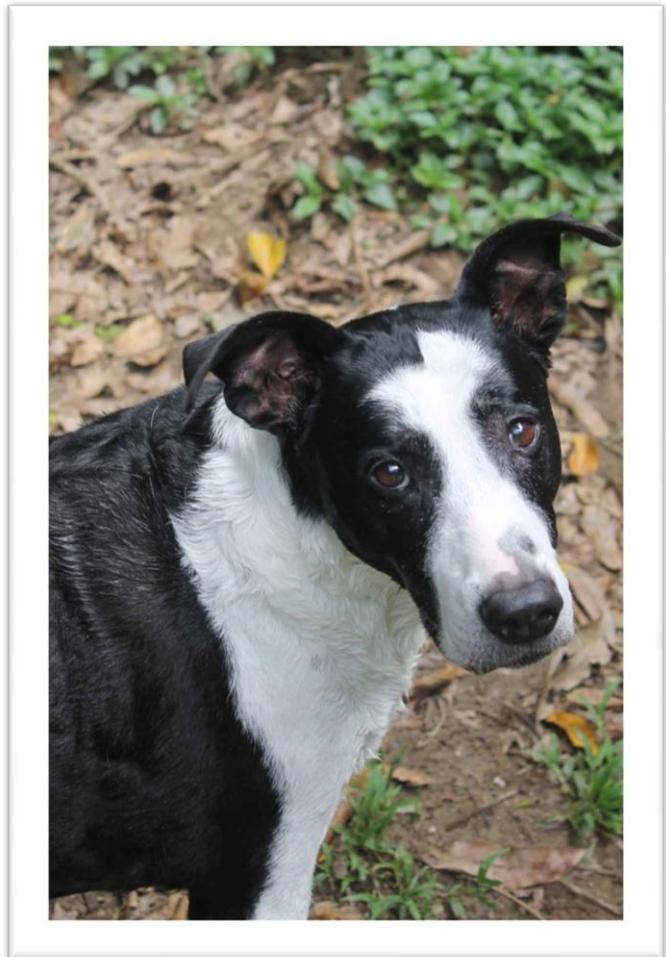
Aquila and Buddha's story by Sharon Murphy

I met my dogs on Saturday, the 6th of December in 2003, the day they were born, in Weipa. I came home from work and my housemate called me from the back yard. Puppies! She plucked each one from the kennel where they squirmed blindly around their mum. "A little girl, a little girl, a little boy," she said as she checked their tummies, one after the other, until all 15 were tumbling around the garden. It was so exciting.

A few days later, we came home and there were four. The owner of the mum had come over and I couldn't bear to ask what happened to the others. I couldn't even go out to the garden to check on them, it was too depressing, until I came home from work at the end of the week and found him hosing out the kennel. When he left, I heard growling. He had given mum a bone. The pups were hungry. She growled at them. It broke my heart. I went out and freed them all, mum and the four tiny puppies. I have tried to keep them free ever since.

After a few months, I took three of the pups and moved down to Cairns. I quickly learned that there was no way I had the skills to parent three young dogs. I found a loving home for the most mischievous of the pack and we became a family of three. Buddha, a brindle and white boy, was incredible, so obedient and loyal. He paused at every doorway, waiting for me to go ahead of him, and still does. He was always at my side, waiting for my approval. Aquila, (Monkey), a black and white little girl, was the runt of the litter. Tiny and sickly, I didn't understand why she had been spared the cull, but when I picked her up and gave her a cuddle she transformed in my hands. She bloomed. I loved them both beyond anything I had ever felt. I still do.

On my way to Weipa, I had been diagnosed with a serious illness and in Cairns I started on a year-long course of treatment that kept me in bed most of the time. The doggies were a handful and I had no energy, physical or emotional, and zero dog skills. We all



winged it and learned how to be a family. "Buddha, Aquila, Mummy. Buddha, Aquila, Mummy," I said often, tapping each of us in turn on the head, to teach us all our new names and roles.

The year was gruelling and depressing, more so when the treatment was unsuccessful and I suffered a relapse. I was in a very dark place but I understood that nothing was more important than my new little family. I couldn't bear the idea of Mummy not coming home to their excited greetings, and I made the clear decision that I had to be there for at least another 10 years. I made that commitment to them.

My life turned around and I found peace with my illness and was eventually cured. Early on, we discovered a tremendous group of like-minded people and dogs at Goomboora Park, becoming close friends, all of us meeting daily, rain or shine. I can count on one hand the number of days per year that we have missed our walk at Goomboora, and the total number of days ever would be less than a dozen. My dogs grew up there. It is their home away from home.

Last year my lovely boy Buddha was struck down by a horrible paralysis tick and I very nearly lost him. I apologized to him over and over and over again. It is my duty to protect them and I had failed, although ultimately I did save him, thank goodness. Then earlier this year he was in a fight, his first ever, at the age of eleven years. A young doggy had a go at him, biting his ear, and suddenly it was on! I screamed and was frozen, watching, unable to help. Fortunately a friend tore them apart and I saw my boy covered in blood, shaking, scared. He recovered physically after a few weeks - the swelling went down, the infection fought off with antibiotics. But psychologically he remains scarred, as do I. Neither of us has our open trust anymore and we both avoid strange dogs. It's quite sad, and Goomboora has lost some of its beauty.

Buddha has also lost a lot of his youth. He is very grey on the muzzle, his brindle much lighter than it was. He looks his age. His legs are stiff and he struggles to get in the car, but I love to help him. I'm his Mummy and we are a team.

Aquila is still the monkey she has always been. She heads straight to the barbecue at the park and comes out with a black greasy stripe on the back of her neck. Barbecue head, we call it. She requires supervision at every meal or she will eat all of Buddha's food, and he would always let her. She has allergies and itches like crazy, but she is as youthful and bouncy as she was as a pup. People don't believe me when I say she and Buddha are now twelve years old.

I know they won't be with me much longer. I can't my imagine life without them. I made a promise to them all those years ago that I would always come home for them, I would always feed them, I would always take them to the park, I would always be there for them. I so wish they could make the promise back to me, that they will always be there for me. Bless them, Buddha and Aquila, for giving me these years.

