

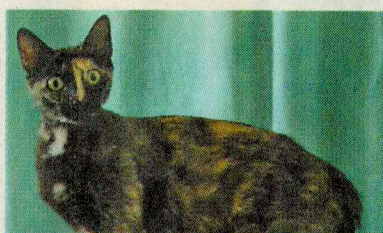
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# Local Rescue Dog Goes From Rags to Riches

**Royal Jasper was adopted from the Humane Society/SPCA of Sumter County, and he now is the winner of several trophies and awards.**

By **RACHEL STUART**  
Daily Sun Staff Writer

**LEESBURG**

It's not every day you see a dog in a cowboy costume riding a toy pony.

Royal Jasper, a 6-year-old Shih Tzu mix, is living his best life.

With various costumes, trophies, ribbons and awards, Royal is making a name for himself everywhere he goes.

But he did not always know this life of fame.

Sharon Dodsworth, of Leesburg, first laid eyes on Royal in June 2014 at the Humane Society/SPCA of Sumter County. She was actively looking for another best friend after her Labrador retriever, Jake, had passed away a month prior.

Before his name was changed to Royal, he was known as "Rags" at the Humane Society because he looked like a dirty rag.

"As soon as I saw him, I knew he was the one I wanted," Dodsworth said.

After she adopted him, she decided to change his name to Royal Jasper because she was going to treat him like royalty, and the colors of his coat match the colors of a jasper stone.

It did not take long before he transformed into a superstar and became known as "Royal Rags to Riches."

Dodsworth started buying him outfits, and she said Royal loved to dress up and sit like he was posing for the camera.

With a full wardrobe of costumes, Royal participates in all the local parades and contests Dodsworth can find, such as the Strut Your Mutt charity dog walk in The Villages and Leesburg's Mardi Gras celebration.

In March, they participated in a pet parade and contest with America's Top Dog Model, a brand that includes a national contest, annual calendar and online store.

Dodsworth and Royal went to the organization's casting call in April, and Royal was a finalist out of about 400 dogs that competed this year.

Photos of the 11 finalists and



Rachel Stuart | Daily Sun

**Sharon Dodsworth, of Leesburg, adopted her 6-year-old Shih Tzu mix, Royal Jasper, from the Humane Society/SPCA of Sumter County. Royal now is living the life of fame as he participates in various parades and contests.**

one winner from the contest will appear in the organization's 2020 calendar, and Royal will represent the month of July.

"Adorable Royal wowed the judges with his stage presence as he paraded across the stage on his toy horse," said Jo Jo Harder, the CEO and creator of America's Top Dog Model. "We also love seeing the interaction between him and his mom, Sharon. It is apparent that they are very close."

Dodsworth wasn't always a dog person. In fact, she was scared of dogs after she was bitten by a German shepherd as a child.

But she decided to get her first dog in 1999 from the Lake County Animal Shelter. To overcome her fear, she got Nellie, a German shepherd mix.

Jake came along a few years later, and when they both passed away, Dodsworth said she couldn't stand being without a dog.

Now, she goes everywhere she can with Royal, and passersby can't help but stop to take photos.

His bright blue eyes are enough to make someone stop in their tracks, but it is an added bonus to see Royal standing upright on his toy pony without hesitation.

"He loves the attention, and I love to see people's reactions," Dodsworth said.

To help spread his story, Lissa Theisler wrote a book about Royal in 2015.

She heard about Royal while volunteering at the Humane Society/SPCA of Sumter County, and she contacted

"This little dog is starting a brand new life, and I thought it would be a way for children to see how important it is to adopt an animal and give them a great life," said Theisler, of the Village of Ashland.

While Dodsworth and Royal are enjoying the spotlight, Dodsworth does not forget about Royal's upbringing.

She has a stack of business cards ready to pass out that read, "My name is Royal Rags to Riches," with contact information for his personal Facebook page and the Humane Society/SPCA of Sumter County.

She likes to enter parades and contests that support animal shelters, and she also donates a lot of Royal's prizes, including boxes of treats, to the Humane Society.

Having handmade Royal's cowboy costume, Dodsworth said, she has a dream to eventually make and sell pet accessories to support the Humane Society. Her idea is to make new items from recycled materials, which would represent rags to riches.

For now, she continues to let Royal spread love throughout the community.

Whether they are making guest appearances at local

libraries or just walking around one of the town squares in The Villages, Dodsworth said, she does it with one purpose in mind.

"I'm not doing it for the fame. We're doing it because we love to see people smile," she

said. "He gets a lot of attention because he has a permanent smile. If you had his life, you'd smile, too."

To keep up with Royal's journey, follow him on his Facebook page, "Royal Rags to Riches."

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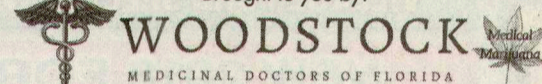
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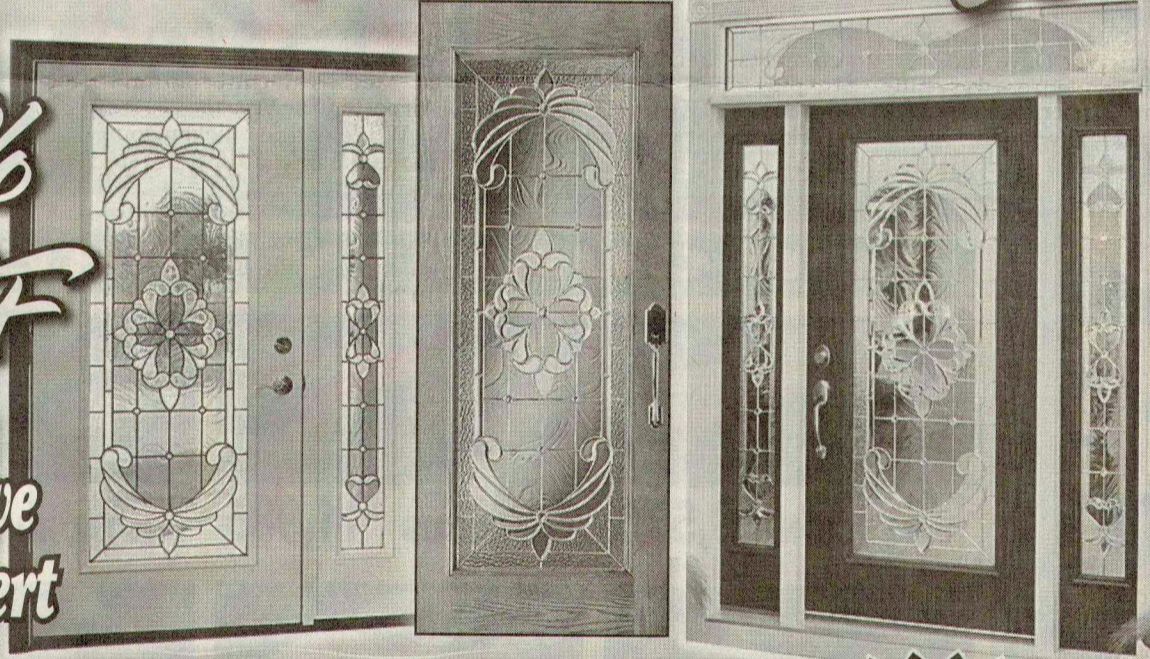
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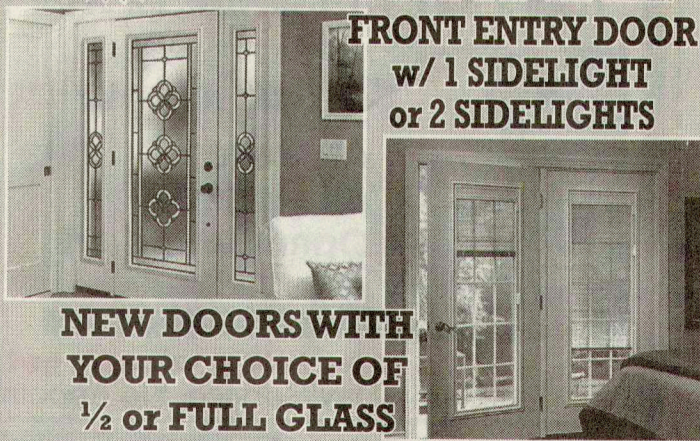
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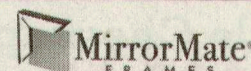
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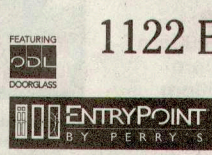
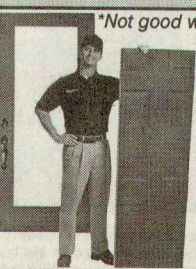
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