

Dog

House

When it comes to fostering canines, actor **Denise Richards** has an open-door policy

By Melanie D.G. Kaplan, WebMD Contributing Writer

Denise Richards talks openly about her dogs. She'll tell you about their accommodations (not too shabby), the music they listen to (classical), and what she cooks when they're sick (pumpkin with rice and chicken). But ask her exactly how many live under her roof, and you'll discover the extent of her canine obsession.

"The number varies, because I'm often fostering," Richards says, sidestepping the question. "Let's just say: I built a dog room at my house."

The 40-year-old actor and former model, who played a "Bond girl" opposite Pierce Brosnan in *The World Is Not Enough* and appeared in the hit sitcom *Seinfeld*, her own E! reality show, and, more recently, NBC's *30 Rock*, is the real deal when it comes to dog rescue. She not only pulls pups out of line for euthanasia at her local shelter in Los Angeles, but she also houses them in a space so cushy it would make most mutts—and even a few humans—green with envy. In fact, the number of dogs in Richards' home is irrelevant. From her point of view, the more, the better.

"When I gutted and remodeled my house, I had the garage converted to a dog bedroom," Richards says. "It has stalls and beautiful bronzy, caramel-colored wallpaper that I wanted for my house. But then I didn't have a room for it, so the dogs got it. Everyone who sees my dog room wants to come back as one of my dogs."

From the time she was little, Richards has had a soft spot for homeless dogs. On family camping trips, when she came across strays, she lobbied her parents to bring them home. She didn't win those battles, but the dogs they did adopt were rescues. "The last one was a schnauzer that had been abused," she remembers. "It was blind in one eye. I loved that my mom didn't care what the dog looked like. It didn't have to be the prettiest dog."

Much of Richards' connection to animals comes from her mother (who died from kidney cancer in 2007). And Richards sees the same unconditional animal love in her daughters Sami, 8, and Lola, 6. (Their dad is Richards' ex, actor Charlie Sheen. Richards also adopted a baby girl, Eloise, last year.) The girls take after Richards, attracted to animals that require extra

attention. "They gravitate to the ones that are hurt or sick or look different," she says.

Richards has volunteered at shelters over the years and today is active with Best Friends Animal Society's Pup My Ride program (bestfriends.org). The organization, which has a sanctuary in Utah, organizes dog transport from shelters and puppy mills to areas where the dogs are most likely to find homes. "So far they've saved thousands of dogs," Richards says. "But it's so heartbreaking, because you see all the dogs that can't go on the ride—the ones that are too old or sick. I've taken a lot of those home."

One is Josie, a 17-year-old mutt Richards adopted in 2010. "I just couldn't imagine her ending her days at a shelter," she says. Another is Princess, a shih tzu with cancer who had nearly starved to death. These two, along with her longtime pet, Hank, a French bulldog, are part of the current pack.

Richards devotes a section of her website to animals, where she posts photos of dogs available for adoption. She says even if someone is looking for a puppy rather

than an older dog, a shelter is the way to go since they have dogs of every size, shape, color, and age. Richards praises pet stores such as Fresh Paws of Bel Air and Pet Rush, both in Los Angeles, with dogs from shelters instead of puppy mills.

"It's great, because shelters can be intimidating, and a lot of people going there don't have a vision of what a dog can look like," she says. "I've brought home some dogs where just a wash and haircut made such a difference."

Richards has a vision for dogs—her own, plus those she has yet to save: "A farm with a rescue sanctuary," she says confidently. "I would love to have that one day." ●



Richards is active with Best Friends Animal Society's Pup My Ride program, which transports dogs to areas where they can find good homes.

Reviewed by
William Draper, DVM
WebMD PET
HEALTH EXPERT



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