

It's 2 a.m. and I'm trying unsuccessfully to sleep in the loft of a tractor trailer parked outside a motel in Allentown, Pa. A 12-week-old black lab is curled up inches from my face and below us, 64 more dogs are resting peacefully in kennels stacked two or three high and secured along the truck's walls. Our driver, Gregh Mahle, is sound asleep in the middle of the floor.

Mahle is used to sleeping in his truck: Twice a month he leaves his wife and home in Zanesville, Ohio, to drive a familiar route through the Deep South, making stops in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama to pick up dogs that have been removed from "death row" at high-kill shelters by local rescue groups. Then Mahle turns north toward New England, where there is higher demand for shelter dogs.

Over the past nine years, Mahle has helped save tens of thousands of dogs. His transport service, Rescue Road Trips, just about breaks even. (A portion of adoption fees cover his costs.) But Mahle, who ran a family restaurant in his prior life, doesn't do it for the money: "I turned 51 last year, and I am happier now than I have been in my whole life."

At designated spots along Mahle's route, volunteers meet his rig for "walk-potty-snack" breaks. Last night as he pulled into the Comfort Inn parking lot, two dozen "Allentown Angels" had gathered, as they do every other Friday night



Mahle with Audi before she was delivered to her new family. See more photos at parade.com/rescue.

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Homeward Bound

One dedicated man hits the road in a 12-wheel rig on a mission to save precious pups **By Peter Zheutlin**

around 7 p.m. The volunteers are drawn to Mahle's mission, as well as to the man himself: "His heart is as big as a Volkswagen," group coordinator Keith Remaly told me.

The puppy snoozing in the kennel near my head is Audi. She's on her way to the Dooley family of Connecticut. Teenagers Meagan and Lauren fell in love with Audi when they saw her photo on PetFinder.com, a database used by rescue groups such as Labs4Rescue, which arranged Audi's adoption.

Audi's mother was found pregnant, living by a dumpster

in the small city of New Iberia, La. When two Labs4Rescue volunteers learned she was to be euthanized at the parish animal control facility, they rushed to get her; she delivered the first of 11 puppies in the backseat of their SUV. [Editor's note: All 12 dogs have since made the trip north with Mahle.]

But for every dog Mahle delivers, many more are euthanized. Southern shelters are overwhelmed by strays, says Keri Toth, president of the

Humane Society of Central Louisiana, because spaying and neutering are not common practice. In rural areas, backyard breeders produce more puppies than they can sell; many dogs are let go to fend for themselves. In Louisiana in 2010 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), 32 shelters reported taking in 69,540 dogs; 43,278 of them were put down, according to Maddie's Fund, a nonprofit that tracks canine euthanasia statistics.

At sunrise, Mahle fires up the truck and we push off for New York and Connecticut, where dozens of families are waiting in parking lots to welcome our passengers. At every stop, Mahle leaps out of the cab and shouts, "Hello! I'm Greg! Is everyone excited?"

When we find the Dooleys, Mahle takes Audi from her crate and hands her to the girls; full of pent-up puppy energy, Audi squirms to lick their faces. For Audi, a long and difficult journey is ending as one filled with love begins.

Mahle has witnessed this scene countless times, but it never gets old. As he rolls up to a fast-food restaurant in Putnam, Conn., the final stop of the day, some 50 people burst into applause. "A few weeks ago these dogs were going to die," Mahle says. "Now watch. The truck doors open, light pours in, and each one goes into the arms of a loving family. This is heaven." **E**

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