

She was playful and bossy, with the kind of smiley face and thumping tail that melts the hearts of humans. But the San Diego Humane Society's efforts to make her adoptable revealed that Genie's dogged nature had a flip side: the potential to hurt people through her dominant play. Euthanasia was the only answer, but not before Genie had received more love than she'd ever known from her adoring posse of volunteers and trainers at the humane society.

Damn dog.

Genie always seemed so normal when she was in our office, happily munching on a rawhide (her favorite chew toy), usually acting like an adolescent puppy by getting into things. She was always giving cuddles to anyone who would care to cuddle with her, as long as she had exercised enough to get past the excitement of getting out of the kennel beforehand.

I so wanted her to be weird, to at least look aggressive, but Genie looked cute and happy despite my best efforts to wish her into some sort of demonic beast of a pit bull. It was obvious she didn't know she was going to die in just a few hours, but couldn't she just make us all feel better by confirming her fate with some kind of nasty display of violence? At least then, Genie's euthanasia would be easier to accept.

No, she just looked up each time someone walked in the door, her tail thumping wildly on the floor as she continued to chew away at the rawhide. She got up every now and then to greet people as they came in offering her food. Hamburgers, a steak sandwich, cookies, Teddy Grahams, turkey, and French fries were all among the gifts. If dogs could have wishes, this would be the ultimate—a virtual river of junk food, all being hand-fed, sometimes mouth-to-mouth fed, and in a gluttonous amount by those who had loved her, had cared for her, had gone to the limits for her. It was Doggie Nirvana!



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Behavior modification, impulse control training, TTouch, and all the love the San Diego Humane Society could give were still not enough for Genie, whose buoyant but dominant personality made placement in a new home too risky.

Genie didn't understand she was getting her last meal; she just enjoyed the visits and looked at the door each time she heard footsteps coming up the stairs outside of our office. She almost looked disappointed when the footsteps echoed past the door and down the hall to a classroom where testing had been taking place all day. It was classical conditioning in its purest form—Pavlov's effect taking place in our tiny behavior and training office: The door opening equaled great food for Genie! Irony has a way of forcing itself into lives at the most telling moments.

With that, I couldn't help but think that I would love to have such attention if it were to be my last day on earth, and lucky Genie had gotten that much attention nearly every day of the five months she lived at the shelter, just without all the food. She had built up her own posse of volunteers and employees and they looked out for her, taking her on field trips, working with her on the training plans our department had devised to help curtail the use of her hard mouth, all the while hoping that someone would want to adopt her.

It was that enormous effort that brought up the questions that swam in my head and kept me from sleeping well that night: I wondered how this happened? Where did we go wrong? What did we miss? Could we have done something different? Should we have put some of this effort into other dogs who might have missed their chance because we were too entrenched with saving Genie?

There was always a reason to keep working with her, keep trying to "fix" her. It's what we do in the training and behavior department; we fix problem dogs, so we kept trying.

It seemed as though we did everything, but Genie's behavior problems were like a cancer that wasn't detectable just yet, but the lesions were growing nevertheless. We tried it all: behavior modification, impulse control, Bach Flowers, obedience training, TTouch, diet, and love, oh, the love—but the cancer was increasing and

spreading, and it was malignant and untreatable, despite our best efforts to stop it.

If we wanted an uncomplicated conclusion as to why Genie was to be put to sleep, it would have been easy to point toward the outrage of the public for Genie's fate. It never fails whenever terrorist pit bulls splash across the headlines and into homes via the television, more pit bulls die in shelters all across the nation simply because they were born into pit bull skin. It would have been easy to explain the liability, the danger of putting yet another pit bull into the community, but that wouldn't have been the truth. Genie was not really an overtly aggressive dog. She was bossy, and she had a low threshold for excitement, and with that, Genie used her teeth when she played, or when she wanted something, or if she didn't like something, or if she just felt like biting for the sake of biting. Our ultimate decision had nothing to do with her being a pit bull. It was Genie herself, teetering on the edge of aggression, who tipped the scales.

Could we have done more to prevent the outcome of Genie's destiny? The experts said no. One of her supporters paid for Genie to go to a UC Davis Veterinary Behavior program to see if we missed something—"She's a dominant, confident dog that simply 'chooses' not to hurt any of us," said the vet. But she *had* hurt us, not badly, not "newspaper headline: *Pit Mauling*" hurt, but a small puncture on my arm in rough play, and big bruises on my and other trainers' hands, and more bruises on an upper arm of still another trainer, but there always seemed to be a way to excuse the bites—"she was too excited coming out of her kennel," or "she was trying to get the ball." There was always a reason to keep working with her, keep trying to "fix" her. It's what we do in the training and behavior department; we fix problem dogs, so we kept trying.

We had to come out of our optimistic fog and into the excruciating sunlight when Genie bit our new animal care director, not just once, but twice, and also bit the veterinarian at the UC Davis program during the interview that was set up to try and save her life. Everyone who worked with Genie wanted to run back into the fog, but that hiding place fizzled like a drop of water on a hot sidewalk in August with those bites.

Friends and supporters of Genie began trailing into our tiny office to visit with her on that final day and they looked tired, painfully concerned, and blurry-eyed from crying. Resolving a dog's death wasn't easy, even with all the facts. There was talk about sending her to live at a sanctuary, about using drugs, about putting her in a foster home, about pulling her teeth out, but everyone knew Genie would die that day, everyone except Genie.



I wanted to be angry with Genie and her red and white pit bull skin that strained over tight muscles and finally rested at the opening of her smiling mouth. I wanted to blame her for the feel of strong jaws that had clamped down on my arms and my hands too many times. I wanted the guilt to go away with being angry with her. Genie just thumped her tail as I reached to take her leash. It was time.

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Sherri Michelet, Lee Anne Owens,
Amy Gibson, and Andrea
Ashbaugh were among the
admiring posse of employees and
volunteers trying to make a
difference in Genie's life.

I led her away from the others who loved her and realized Genie had known the most love she would ever know. There was a reason she never left the shelter, never was adopted or found a foster home; she was home, and no one else could have loved her like all of us did.

Damn dog.

A senior trainer at the San Diego Humane Society in California, Nan Arthur is also a professional writer and photographer.