

McCurnin volunteers for the Southern California Labrador Retriever Rescue.



Lawyer Turns Tragic Trip Into Special Vocation

Tom McCurnin woke up on a sandbar, exhausted and scared. Nothing was broken, but he was bruised and bloodied. His wife, Jodi McCurnin, was by his side, hurt but alive.

Their beloved dog, a 6-year-old yellow Labrador retriever named Libby, was nowhere in sight. Tom McCurnin presumed she was dead.

About a half-hour earlier, the Los Angeles couple prepared for a relaxing picnic on an island above Rebecca Falls, a spectacular spot in the forested Quetico Park in Southern Ontario, Canada. The picnic was a planned stop on their two-week canoe trip in the vast, uninhabited wilderness in August 1999.

As the McCurnins paddled to the island for their picnic, unusually swift currents in the storm-swollen stream that feed the falls pulled them over the 60-foot-high precipice. Their canoe tipped over, and the couple and their dog fell head over heels down the falls.

"We fell end over end, like socks in a dryer," says Tom McCurnin, who is a partner with the Los Angeles-based Barton Klugman & Oetting.

When he finally hit the water below, McCurnin was sucked into a deep pool of water below the falls. Just before he blacked out from lack of oxygen, he asked himself if the end had finally come.

"I always wondered how and where it would be," McCurnin, 50, says. "I guess there could be worse places to die."

The river eventually belched out

him and his wife (Jodi McCurnin was wearing a life preserver, Tom McCurnin wasn't) and carried them 200 yards downstream to the sandbar. But Libby was no where to be found.

"Right then, I vowed that if I couldn't save her, I would save 100 other dogs," he says.

That vow became a major avocation for the business and transactional lawyer. When he returned home to Los Angeles, he volunteered with Southern California Labrador Retriever Rescue, which saves abandoned and stray Labs.

The volunteer organization locates Labs at animal shelters in six Southern California counties, nurses them back to health and places them in new homes.

There are many similar organizations devoted to various breeds of dogs, such as greyhounds, but McCurnin is committed to Libby and her breed.

"I mourn Libby every day," he says. "She was my best friend."

As a foster "parent" for the organization, he takes Labs into his home for up to two weeks, gets them medical attention, teaches them social skills and feeds them a special diet to bring back shine and gloss to their coats.

"They're desirable, great dogs," he says of the breed. "Labs just love people. They gravitate toward people. They so want to please people."

The work has been cathartic for the banking lawyer.

"The concept is one of absolute remorse," he says. "I made a lot of mis-

takes on that trip. [Those mistakes] probably cost the life of my beloved dog and put my wife at risk. [Saving Labs] helps me redeem myself. It's an act of contrition. I can't bring Libby back, but I can save a dog's life today."

One of the beneficiaries of McCurnin's special devotion to Labs is Los Angeles-based bankruptcy attorney Paul Arrow.

This spring, Arrow, who is of-counsel to Buchalter Nemer Fields & Younger, was looking for a dog for his 8-year-old son. He searched the Web and found the site of Southern California Labrador Retriever Rescue, which lists dogs ready for adoption. Then he met McCurnin and his foster dog, Dexter.

"Tom came to our house and talked with us for an hour," Arrow says. "He really introduced us to the dog."

Dexter, who is a 1-year-old yellow Lab, has been a perfect fit for the young family.

"He's really a good dog," Arrow says, simply.

McCurnin is equally pleased. "It's a gift I gave to Paul and his son that they'll remember their whole lives. They're such a great family, I hope Dexter will think good dog thoughts about me, too," he says.

Foster pet-owning, he says, "is such a rewarding thing, as opposed to defending a bank or throwing someone into bankruptcy and taking all of their assets. When I go home, I can tell my wife I did something good today."

— Erik Cummins

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