

HEROINE

JOANNE LEFSON

The animal activist and her furry friend Oscar are determined to help stranded canines the world over find loving homes.



THEY'VE RECENTLY TRAVELLED to 30 countries and visited over 15,000 animal shelters, but for Joanne Lefson, 38, and her favourite pet, Oscar, the World Woof Tour was just the beginning. Promoting dog adoption has become a full-time career for the former professional golfer, who's always had a heart for animals. With a national school tour, a book of their adventures to be published soon and a documentary in the pipeline, Joanne wants to end the public perception that shelter dogs aren't worthy of a home.

JOANNE ON...

Her father's influence: "He was born in India, and had a pet peacock and elephant. Being surrounded by animals taught him compassion, a trait he passed on by advising me to be sensitive to those in pain."

Starting early: "In my teens I helped out at the local SPCA by collecting newspapers, cleaning kennels and taking dogs for walks."

Turning dreams into reality: "During high school, I played golf for up to 10 hours a day, gave up my social life and had to cut back on time at the shelter in order to win a scholarship to a university in the US. This accomplishment made me realise that I am responsible for my own future."

Living her purpose: "Getting my national colours and playing golf professionally in the US was amazing, but I knew it wasn't my life purpose.

After a decade abroad, I decided I wanted to make a contribution in South Africa, so I returned home."

Love at first sight: "In 2004, I went to the SPCA to adopt a dog. The minute I saw Oscar, his alert, eager eyes tugged at my heart and I decided to take him. When people told me how cute he was, I would tell them I got him from an animal shelter. Their disbelief sparked the idea to promote shelters as good places to adopt pets."

Sacrifices: "Selling my house to fund the World Woof Tour was an easy decision, because I had a strong conviction that it needed to happen."

Life lessons: "Seeing so much of the world was wonderful. From the most remote areas of Nepal to suburban San Diego, I learnt that animals have a wonderful way of uniting people."

The power of collaboration: "The interest we've received shows that the message about animal welfare is starting to be heard. A few individuals and companies helped out during the tour with donations. I didn't have to buy or barter for their support – they were all genuinely passionate."

A pet's love: "Whenever Oscar sits at my feet or jumps on to me, I feel like he's showing me gratitude for giving him a home. My hope is that every shelter dog in South Africa finds a loving family. I'm working on it, one pooch at a time!"

—As told to Norma Young

To contact Joanne, call ☎ 084 436 4443 or visit worldwooftour.com

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