An advocacy group based in Pennsylvania is determined to break the chain for backyard dogs

“I fell in love with him,” Tammy Grimes says simply.

This was no crush. It was serious. She spent time with the guy, she cared for him. His family situation was complicated, and so they had to sneak around a lot. Eventually they were found out, and that meant they couldn’t see each other any more. Grimes’s heart was broken.

“I couldn’t see him at all. … For two years I would just drive by and see him and it just ate at me so bad,” she says.

Oh, love hurts. Haven’t we all felt that way at some point? Haven’t we all had at least one sleepless night when we lie in bed and think back and wonder, What if? When we remember the great love that might have been if bad timing or unfortunate circumstances had not prevented its blossoming?

Everyone has their own haunting memory of The One Who Got Away. For Tammy Grimes, that One was a dog called Worthless. That was his given name, a detail so ridiculously pathetic it sounds fictional. But he was real, a black Lab mix who belonged to one of Grimes’s neighbors in Tipton, Pennsylvania.

And “belonged” is a pretty generous term for his situation. Really, he sat alone in the yard all day, on the end of a chain. Grimes would sneak into his territory and spend time with him and bring him treats when his owners weren’t around. She was so moved by his isolation that she eventually sent the other man in her life—her husband—to talk to the neighbors and ask them if they would be willing to part with the dog. Grimes admits that her husband’s approach probably didn’t win the neighbors over.
“They go, ‘Why does she want him?’ And he goes, ‘She thinks you don’t take care of him,’ and they say, ‘Tell her never to come on our property again.’” Grimes recalls, laughing a little bit at the memory. “I was like, ‘Duh—what’d you tell them that for?’”

“But at least he went,” she says. “I didn’t have the guts to go up.”

Fear can cripple a life, can hold people back from what they want to do. And that’s how it was for Grimes for a while. But the graphic artist had reached a point where she was trying to figure out what to do next, and whenever she tried to envision her mission, the memory of Worthless wouldn’t leave her.

“Whenever the image would come into my head, I would think, That’s not my life’s mission. That can’t be my mission because it’s too hard,” she says. She knew she would enter into conflict with lots of people—some of them her own neighbors—if she took a stand against a practice so commonly accepted in her area. While local ordinances do require that chained dogs have some kind of shelter, the law sets no limits on the amount of time dogs can be kept outside and chained. Grimes knew that if she chose to try and fight for dogs’ rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, she wouldn’t have the state on her side.

“But eventually I realized I had to just do it,” she says. “I was never one to take a stand—because I was scared—but I figured it would be better to do it than die knowing I didn’t do what I was supposed to.”

The nonprofit she founded, Dogs Deserve Better, was incorporated in August of 2002. Back then her idea was to keep it local and get her materials out in her own area. She designed posters and flyers to put up and pass out. She manned a booth at community events where she distributed information and talked to people about chaining. She created a website, www.dogsdeservebetter.com, with her contact information so people could send in the addresses of chained dogs they knew; Grimes would then mail educational materials to the addresses, hoping that a little knowledge would go a long way toward getting chained dogs inside and integrated into real families.

Her materials are varied in tone and approach because she knows that people’s reasons for keeping dogs chained up are varied, too. There’s another chain at work, that of bad habit, and Grimes is determined to find the weakest link in that chain and break it.

Some of her materials focus on the behavioral problems that chained dogs develop, from barking to aggression to heightened territorialism. One poster acknowledges that pet care practices are often handed down from one generation to the next. Showing a sad-looking dog chained in a snowy yard, the poster reads, “Your grandfather did it. Your father did it. Isn’t it time to break the chain?”

Another shows a traditional Good Shepherd style drawing of Jesus,
surrounded by happy dogs. The poster asks, “Would Jesus Chain His Dogs?” Grimes says that poster was specifically designed to remind some of the folks in her community of Jesus's central message of compassion.

“We've got a lot of right-wing religious people who have this domination theory in their head,” she says, noting that two preachers in nearby towns keep their dogs chained up. “That just infuriates me because they are supposed to be setting an example.”

Once she launched her website and made her materials available online, Grimes found that her plan to keep it local wasn't going to happen. What had started as a one-woman show expanded when like-minded people across the country started coming to the website and making contact. Dogs Deserve Better now has another employee who does most of the mailings, and about 100 volunteer representatives across the country send out the anti-chaining materials to addresses within their own communities.

For every person moved to help, though, Grimes has another who's annoyed by her mailings. “I have to stand up against them every day,” she says. “People call here almost every day complaining.”

Their responses range from mild defensiveness to deep anger to biting sarcasm. How dare you? I'm not bringing any filthy dog inside. You know nothing about me. The dog likes being out there. It's none of your business. I guess I'm supposed to bring the horse inside, too?

Grimes has learned to cope with her natural fear of conflict, and once she'd incorporated, she even worked up the nerve to go back to her first love. “I went back up there and asked them if I could have him. At that point being a representative of Dogs Deserve Better made me feel more confident to try again. The guy said, ‘Yeah, just take him. She won't feed him anyway, and he's old.’ ”

And so Bo—the dog formerly known as Worthless—came home with his long lost love. They spent six blissful months together before Bo suffered heart failure and Grimes had to have him euthanized. Still, she says, she loved the time they got together and feels better knowing that the dog had at least a brief experience of what it was like to be loved and kept as a real family dog.

Though she still gets nervous about confronting annoyed people, she occasionally sees a glimmer of hope in some folks' negative responses. “If they’re defensive, they feel a little guilty,” she says. “Even though you won’t see it, you hope that down the road they’ll rethink things. My big hope with those people is that they won’t chain their next dog.”

The group's work keeps evolving. Right now Grimes is working with folks in neighboring Centre County to get an anti-chaining ordinance passed. She's starting there because the county is home to Penn State University and is naturally more progressive. If the measure passes there, Grimes plans to work on her own county to follow suit.

She's also made an unexpected connection. As part of her efforts to
remind people that chaining is bad for both dogs and people, Grimes highlights attacks by chained dogs in press releases that point out the connection between chaining and territory-based dog aggression. Her latest ally is the mother of a little girl who was killed by a chained dog.

The woman contacted Grimes after searching online for her deceased daughter's name and finding it in a Dogs Deserve Better press release. “She dropped out of sight for a year because I think she was grieving,” says Grimes. “But now she has a new baby and she got back in contact again.” With the woman’s help, Grimes hopes to form a new branch of Dogs Deserve Better she plans to call Mothers Against Dog Chaining.

Though she gets plenty of abusive phone calls, most of the people who receive Grimes’s materials never make contact at all, and so she knows that the impact of what Dogs Deserve Better is doing will probably never be fully understood. But mixed in with all the negative feedback from insulted owners, there are a few positive responses.

“I get a couple of people each year who call completely amenable to education,” says Grimes, “and those are the ones who make you go, Wow. You know, they really just didn’t understand.”

During one of its major campaigns, Have a Heart for Chained Dogs, the group sent out about 3,000 handmade valentines—made by schoolchildren, scout troops, and some mentally handicapped adults—to chained dogs. Each dog received a Valentine, a treat, and some educational materials. And after the campaign, Grimes got a letter from one of the people who had sent out a valentine: “The Saturday before Valentine’s Day,” the woman wrote, “I passed a house where I had asked you to send a Valentine to a chained dog that lived on a short chain in the mud. A girl was standing beside the doghouse reading the Valentine you sent to him! Two days later, I passed the house again, and the dog is no longer on a chain!”

It’s those letters, combined with her fond memories of the dog formerly known as Worthless, that keep Grimes going. There aren’t many of them, but she hopes to receive more as the group keeps reaching out. They’re love letters, of a kind, to the one who (almost) got away.

Reproduced from the September-October 2005 issue of Animal Sheltering magazine.