



Loss and Love: Sparta Family's Story of Pet Adoption Under Covid-19

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SPARTA, NJ - Magnum, a yellow Labrador retriever, was their first dog. He came from a breeder and died at the age of six after suffering from kidney failure. That was before kids for Sparta residents Erin and Mike Ryan.

"Devastating, because it was my first dog ever," Erin said about Magnum's passing, staring at her husband Mike, sharing more than just eye contact. The pain was still palpable at the dining room table in the couple's beautiful home on Lake Mohawk in the center of town.

"We waited a while before another dog," Erin said.

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By 2013, a decade after Magnum's death, the Ryans were ready for another dog. So were the three children they added to the family, Michael, 19, Kate, 17, and Nick, 16.

"The kids were asking for a dog," Erin said. "We were really ready." This time they decided to adopt a dog, as opposed to going to a breeder, a trend seen across the country.

"Mike was up on a ski trip," Erin said. "I took the kids to Mohawk Gardens, where there was a pet adoption day by OSCAR." Short for [One Step Closer Animal Rescue](#), OSCAR is located in the Ryans' hometown.

One of the first dogs the Ryans encountered was Bucky, a 110-pound Great Pyrenees. The kids were naturally drawn to Bucky, Michael composing a drawing of the dog that remains in the Ryans' home.

Erin remembers the family discussion this way:

"I sent Mike a picture of the dog and I was like this is the dog we all want. A little bigger than what we were talking about."

Mike's recall, well, was slightly different:

"It wasn't quite like that. I was on a ski lift and I got a message that was just like, 'meet our new dog.' It was a picture of Buck."

Erin and Bucky were particularly close, taking daily walks. "He was so chill," Erin said. "He was our best furry friend ever – a great listener, a family member."

Unfortunately, Bucky faced severe medical issues and died in 2020. "That was tough, heartbreaking, right before Thanksgiving," Erin said sadly. This only added to the challenges of the pandemic.

The whole family stood with Bucky as the vet put him to rest, Michael having come home from UMass Lowell, where he attends college.

"He was a little scared," Mike said of Bucky during his last moments, his voice fading, eyes falling.

"My thing was I really needed them to say goodbye to him," Erin said about Michael's return home and the whole family's trip to the vet. "I have lost two girlfriends at a young age and I didn't get the chance to say goodbye so I thought it was important for them," she said, eyes glistening but certain she made the right decision.

"Bucky was a lot like her," Erin continued, becoming immediately more upbeat, pointing to a large, white, furry animal, napping under the dining room table.

"This is Luna," Erin said. The Ryans adopted Luna, a Great Pyrenees girl, from OSCAR in January. Luna came with Levi, a boy of the Nottosure breed, probably a mix of Great Pyrenees and Saint Bernard. Levi was laying next to Luna. Two peas in a pod.



Left to right, Michael, Nick, Kate, Mike and Erin Ryan. Levi and Luna, also left to right. Sparta, New Jersey.

Mike wants more details on Levi, perhaps a DNA test. "There's no shortage of saliva," Mike said.

The decision-making process this time around had a familiar feel to it.

Erin: "Two dogs or none." Short, to the point, committed.

Mike, having been summoned to meet the rest of the family at OSCAR: "I thought we were getting one dog. I walk in. I was like, oh boy, both these dogs were in there. I could tell right away it was a done deal."

Luna and Levi seem to have been friends forever. But like the Ryans, there is a hierarchy. Luna is definitely the alpha – female, according to Erin.

"They play with each other, it's great," Erin said. "Their relationship is so sweet."

Mike is fully on board with the results.

"I feel like adopted dogs, as soon as you get them, they are just grateful," Mike said. "Because they have already been through hell."

Humans can be grateful too, especially during a pandemic.

"With Covid and everything, we were all struggling, I was struggling for sure," Erin said. "There is no judgment, they just love you no matter what."

"A pet makes your house a home," Erin said.

During Covid-19, there is a [shortage of dogs available for adoption](#), due in part because of an increased demand, but also because successful spay and neuter programs nationwide.

Adopting from OSCAR costs approximately \$375 per dog, which covers shots and spay and neuter. Then there is the food. The Ryans don't mind.

"Kids still cost more - kids are way more expensive than dogs," Mike says, looking at Michael, the student in the out-of-state college.

Michael will miss Levi and Luna when at school. "I love the dogs," he said.

In the Ryan household, the decision-making process is less than democratic, but that sentiment is unanimous.