

Canine Estates

JAYNE AND GREG SIDWELL,
PALM HARBOR, FLORIDA

Tears come to my eyes as Greg Sidwell tells me the story of Marshmallow, a Bichon Frise that Jayne rescued from an abusive home. “I was out of town when Jayne brought him home,” explains Greg, “And when I walked into the house, he thought that I was going to beat him. The previous owner had hit his back so hard that even if you touched it lightly, he would cry out. For the first six months, when I would walk into the room, he would just hit the floor. And before he would walk into a room, he would stick his head around to make sure it was okay and he wasn’t going to be beaten. It took about a year for him not to flinch if I put my hand out to touch him, but he finally realized that the beatings and abuse were over. He’s seventeen now and he’s a happy guy these days.”



One of the three bronze plaques that mark the entrances to Canine Estates

A group portrait of Jayne and Greg’s dogs. Front row: Praline, Latté, Mocha, Creme, Sugar, Cookie, Lollipop and Tiramisu. Back row: Soufflé, Parfait, Éclair, Twix, Marshmallow, Truffle and Cannoli



Jayne and Greg Sidwell with Soufflé, Éclair, Twix and Cookie

Greg and Jayne are recounting some stories of their rescue dogs and it is hard to imagine that anyone would want to abuse the adorable dogs that are happily ensconced on the sofa with them: the Cavalier King Charles Spaniels Éclair and Soufflé, Cookie the Pekingese, and Twix, the Miniature Pinscher. But these are only four of the fifteen dogs that they live with, most rescued from harrowing experiences or abusive homes. Éclair, the subject of Christine Merrill’s portrait, was kept in a crate for the first year of his life so his growth was altered and he was physically deformed. Éclair now rests on a pillow beside Jayne, playfully jumping on and off the sofa as I try to get him to sit still for his photo.

The Sidwells both had dogs growing up – he in Georgia and she in Alabama. Jayne, in particular, remembers her childhood surrounded with as many as ten dogs at a time. Her father was a retired major who had a riding academy, and as Jayne puts it, “I think my mother was kind of known for taking in animals, so people would drop them off.” Still, no one could have predicted that this couple would go to such lengths to save the lives of abandoned dogs and to provide them with such a loving home.



Christine Merrill, Pug Head Study, Oil on board, 12 inches diameter

The large, beautiful house which Jayne and Greg built in Florida is named “Canine Estates” in honor of their pets. It has a wing devoted to the dogs, with a long hallway connecting it to the main house. The dog wing has a kitchen, grooming room, and a kennel area with a working shelter. There’s also a bedroom where their full-time pet-sitter can sleep, if need be. Greg and Jayne talk about the dogs as if they are members of the family, as if everyone loves dogs as much as they do. “I guess what surprises people the most,” says Greg, “is when I tell them I could not imagine it any other way, without each and every one of them. And they all love you so much, and it doesn’t matter what is happening in your life that day, you know that no matter what, they love you. They are never upset with you and you get that love multiplied by fifteen. For us it’s not a chore. We love them all and I really couldn’t imagine life any other way.”

Nor do Jayne and Greg restrict their rescue efforts to America. Greg jumped through hoops to bring home an abandoned dog they had met in the classical ruins in the ancient Greek city of Kavala. “Our cruise ship had stopped at Kavala,” explains Greg, “and as we were exploring the ruins, this little dog emerged, begging for water and food or whatever it could get from tourists. Well, we continued on our tour, but we felt so badly about leaving that little dog.” It took a lot of convincing, but before they returned to America, Greg managed to track somebody down who would take them seriously about finding her.

The dog was found, and although organizing all the paper work seemed insurmountable, it was finally done. Greg flew to Athens, staying over for one night and returning to Florida via New York with the newly-named Cherry. He



A portrait of Éclair in bronze, one of the several commissioned by Jayne and Greg Sidwell for their foyer



Christine Merrill, The Life of Éclair at Canine Estates, 2007, Oil on panel, 25 x 33 inches

was exhausted when he arrived in New York, but he still had to find a way to take his new dog, who had been on an airplane for twelve hours, for a walk. “So I saw these two Delta officers and I went over to them and I said ‘Can you tell me how I can get out of here and get some grass? I need to find some grass’, and they looked at me funny and I replied, ‘I don’t want to smoke it. I want my dog to walk on it!’ So they showed me how to get out, but even this was not easy. I’m outside the terminal rolling a dog case behind me and the CIA pulls up. This was after the first attack on the World Trade Center, and they were afraid I was a terrorist!” Greg eventually got back to the Tampa airport with Cherry, just two days after he left. “This was back in 1995,” says Jayne, “and Cherry passed away this June. She was a great dog.”

That Jayne and Greg Sidwell collect canine art is immediately evident upon entering their foyer, which is inhabited by whimsical, life-size bronze statues depicting some of their favorite dogs; among them, a recumbent Bichon Frise



Christine Merrill, Recumbent Bichon Frise, Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches

named Marshmallow, a fawn Pug named Tiramisu, and Éclair, the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, all posed as if ready to play. English and European paintings of dogs from as early as 1870 are subtly hung throughout the house, but there are also works by contemporary artists. A pen and ink drawing of Cavalier King Charles Spaniels by Bruce Padgett hangs under a kitchen counter, opposite a painting of a Bichon Frise by Christine Merrill. *Blue Dog* images by Louisiana artist George Rodrigue hang in the exercise room, and the living room is dominated by a large and very fanciful dog house, purchased at an auction for the benefit of a local humane society.

Their first Christine Merrill, a portrait of a recumbent Bichon Frise, was bought in 1995 as a Christmas present for Jayne. “We happened to be in New York, so we decided to visit the William Secord Gallery. We both just love dog paintings, so when we saw your gallery, we said ‘Hey! This is really something that we could start collecting’. Our first purchase was Christine’s painting of

the Bichon Frise, and we have it hung in our kitchen, so that we can see it every day,” explains Greg. “You know,” says Jayne, “I will never forget the first time I saw that painting. I had a feeling of excitement and disbelief because the painting looked so real and looked so much like our Marshmallow! The Sidwells added more Christine Merrill paintings to their collection: portraits of a Shih-Tzu, a Blenheim Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, a French Bulldog and a Pug. “We think Christine’s work is beautiful,” says Jayne, “Her paintings seem three dimensional – it is almost as if you could pick the dog up off the canvas.” Their most prized Christine Merrill, however, is the painting of Éclair, proudly standing in front of their Palm Harbor home. “We chose to do a portrait of Éclair,” explains Jayne, “because he had come from such a bad situation. He couldn’t walk when he went to foster care because he was left in a crate and didn’t get the proper use of his legs. When we got him, he had to have double knee surgery. We wanted him to have the perfect life!”

A view of the Sidwells’ living room, with Christine Merrill’s portrait hanging in the background

