



PETS & THEIR PEOPLE

Martina Contreras with (from left) Sabrina, Jimmy, Patrick, and Jeffrey



Party of Five

A local woman comes to the rescue of a special group of dogs

Some people are chosen for their role in life, some do the choosing. Martina Contreras is one of the former. Moving here from Heidelberg, Germany, some 16 years ago, she is not surprised by the path her new life has taken. While she never owned a dog growing up, she walked every dog in the neighborhood, free of charge, and just for fun.

Contreras, who met her husband when he was stationed in her hometown, came to the U.S. after marrying in 1988. She soon found herself beset in one way or another by animals that clearly had a great need of her. The first was Sabrina, now 16, who had been abandoned on a freeway and was subsequently rescued by Contreras from the Peninsula Humane Society. "We went there looking for a

dog, and she was so skinny and ravenous. Then I read her story and I was sold," Contreras says of adopting Sabrina. "That's when I became aware of the huge pet over-population problem in the U.S., and ever since I've been an advocate. Now, Sabrina is the queen bee of our menagerie," she says. Then came Patrick, a seven-year-old border collie mix that she found behind a dumpster at just three weeks old and is now, thanks to Contreras, an agility whiz. "He just flies over the obstacles. He has speed and is very graceful," she says. Patrick even joins Contreras, a triathlete and Ironwoman-in-training, on her 15-mile runs.

Next came Jeffrey, 8, rescued from teenagers who were literally going to use him as "pit-bull bait," when he was just a puppy. "I was supposed to foster him, but he was so scared I had to keep him. Considering where he started, he's one of my greatest accomplishments." And, finally, the newest addition to the family, Jimmy, an as yet unidentified mixed

breed, found starving and frightened on a nearby neighborhood street. Now he's so strong Contreras calls him her "little stud muffin." "I told my husband I'd find a home for him, and, well, he turned into dog number five. (Another dog, Kelsie, passed away last year.)

Did she find the dogs, or did the dogs find her? Ah, fate and fortune work in mysterious ways. The mission thrust upon her to rescue dogs in need led eventually to a 15-year career training dogs and, for the last 9 years, running her own company, A Dog's Best Friend, training both dogs and their owners. "It's my mission to help people understand pets. They come into our lives and we expect them to know our language. The shelters are full of adolescent dogs with bad behavior because they weren't socialized or trained," she explains. "It's rare for a dog to be aggressive by nature."

Clearly, A Dog's Best Friend can be defined in two words—Martina Contreras. ■