

# An urban pooch's sociable legacy

By Myra Bellin

**O**n the first chilly day of spring, my husband, Ira, our son Michael, and I had to say goodbye to our 12-year-old dog. We cried at his passing, knowing he had chronic lung disease, but not expecting to lose him so soon.

Now, without him, I realize that, aside from the unconditional love they offer their owners, dogs make a special contribution to city life. They drag you out walking several times a day, and once outside, you talk to your neighbors and exchange pleasantries with strangers. In the close quarters of a city, dogs make people friendlier.

When Ira and I decided to get a dog, we wanted to find one that was bright and playful, neither too big nor too small — a dog that could comfortably adapt to city life, meaning the absence of a large backyard would not cause it to behave destructively. After much research, we chose a Brittany, a handsome dog renowned for its hunting prowess. We don't hunt, unless you count the frantic searches for my keys, which seem to disappear with regularity. But the books described a medium-sized dog that seemed perfect: a smart dog that thrives on human contact. We weren't troubled by the need for vigorous, regular exercise — early weekend mornings were a time when the park nearby relaxed its leash rules.

The film *Jumanji*, starring Robin Williams, had left a strong impression several weeks earlier. So we called our mewling, lively puppy Robin.

The hunting instincts braided through Robin's DNA were obvious. In the park, nose to the ground, he tracked ahead of me, first to the right, then to the left. He'd stop now and then to look back, making sure I was following. Occasionally he bounded off



MARGARET SCOTT

into the grass, running and leaping around a circumference of his own making, with the pure joy that seems to be the province of dogs.

But when he spotted a squirrel, everything stopped. He would focus on it with intensity, then begin moving ever so slowly, in a gait dictated by his genes. Rear tucked down, head stretched forward, he moved quietly closer, paw by paw. At some point, when the animals were about 25 feet apart, the squirrel would sense Robin's approach and their eyes would lock.

They stared at each other, not moving, until one broke the stalemate. The squirrel would run for the nearest tree as Robin streaked after it, finally circling the trunk and gazing up as the squirrel scolded him from the safety of the nearest branch. To my great relief, Robin never actually caught a squirrel.



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I suppose that the sight of a hunting dog doing his thing in the middle of the city surprised people. The sheer power of his silent stalking always attracted attention; passersby became as riveted to the dog as the dog was to the squirrel. For brief moments, his instincts belied the civilization around him.

Yet urban living came easily to Robin because he was so gregarious. He did what all dogs do, adopting our family as his surrogate pack. He anticipated our routines, learned our body language, recognized our voices. And his sociable nature extended to our neighbors. Our block became his territory; he needed to explore it every morning, marking his boundaries, greeting his friends, sniffing out interlopers. As we trailed behind him, it became our morning ritual to follow his example; we waved and chatted with our neighbors, many of whom were outside walking their own dogs.

Robin remembered that Fred, the owner of the extremely well-mannered shepherd across the street, had given him a dog biscuit several years ago and never failed to greet him in case he happened to have another in his pocket. Ian and Connor, two boys around the corner, might stop for a quick sniff from Robin on their way to school. Ashley and Scott, the kids down the block, liked to say hello, too. Courtney, the teenager next door, as well as Vicki and John, her parents, always deserved an enthusiastic greeting. Al and Joanne left special treats for him on holidays.

So once the initial shock of his death receded, we decided to host a decidedly urban farewell for Robin. We invited the neighbors to a small cocktail party one weekday evening. It seemed a fitting goodbye for such an affable creature — a toast to an ebullient spirit that made us all a bit more sociable.

Myra Bellin lives and writes in Philadelphia.