

Photographer Josie Borain (pictured here with Stellar) shot the 2009 African Tails calendar, which helps raise funds for dog sterilisation.

The modern perception of beauty is that it's a quality to be sought after and held on to at all costs. But for JUSTINE JOSEPH it snuck up, wagged its tail and stole her heart.

Tails of Hope

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HE HATES POST boxes and black plastic bags blowing in the wind. She's scared of paragliders, motorbikes, helicopters and open umbrellas. Sometimes, she even gets worked up over people wearing hats. But she loves tennis balls, squirrels and barking in the car. And me. That's why

I call her my soul dog. She loves me in a way no one ever has.

Her name is Thula and she's a mutt. A purebred dog of the street. A *brak*. She's kind of skinny and brownish. With black ears and snout, and golden eyes that follow me as I move around the room. The ends of her ears and tip of her tail were hacked off when she was a puppy, so now, in adulthood, she looks something like a hyena.

Thula is beautiful. Over the past 18 months I've walked alongside her, watching her grow. I've seen the cuts on her body heal and her fur flourish over the bony, patchy spots where mange and malnutrition left their marks. And she's walked with me through my own growth process, staying close to my heels as I left my job, moved house twice and dragged my feet over the stony road of divorce. And she slept next to me on my suddenly empty bed. She's been happy to see me, even when I'm not happy to see myself. More than that, she's changed me, and the way I see the world.

MEETING THULA

IT ALL STARTED WITH A CHAT with my dog-crazy friend, Yael Fialkov, in May last year. "I need someone to foster a puppy," she said, with hopeful, hand-dog eyes. "She has been rescued from a bad home and she's gorgeous." "Maybe," I said, scanning my mental address book. "What about you?" she smiled. "Maybe," I said again.

When the puppy arrived she was more gory than gorgeous. She was a basket of bones, mangy, filthy and smelling like the gutter she'd been plucked from. My sister, Janna, came over to help with the clean-up operation. "I work with this woman called Avryn Alter," said Yael over a basinful of soap and a soaking dog. "She runs a crèche for kids from Joe Slovo and Du Noon townships and, when she picks the children up in the morning, she also feeds the dogs and puppies in the street.

There are hundreds of them, thousands maybe. And when there's a really tragic one, Avryn brings it out and I find it a home," she said. "Like this one," I said, wrapping the wilted puppy in a towel. Her golden eyes closed as sleep came.

I couldn't believe it. Somehow, two busy women could find time to be street-dog superheroes. It was a beautiful story, a glowing moment in the dark despondence of modern life. I wanted more of those moments.

PUPPY LOVE

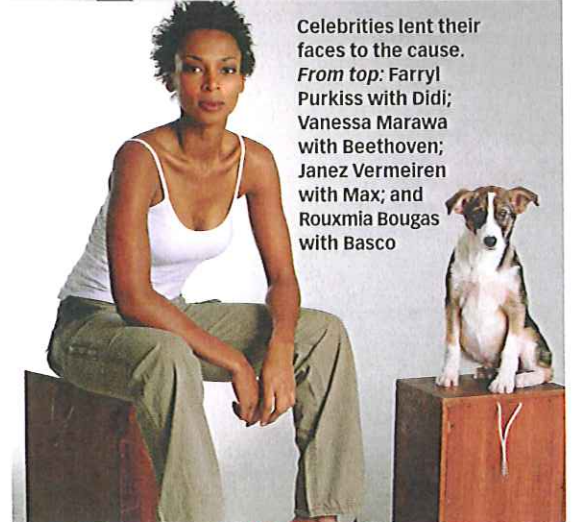
WHAT STARTED OUT AS A TWO-day fostering session became something much more serious. First, the puppy stayed. And second, an idea was born as three women washed a dog. We called it African Tails, a formalised street dog support group. It grew fast, as fast as Thula, who suddenly had the strength to chase my cats, chew my laptop cable and totally rearrange my life.

But that's what change is about, right? It comes upon you in a rush and then slowly scrubs you clean, exposing new ways to live and love. Clearly, animals accelerate this process.

A year and a half after our dog-in-bath eureka moment, African Tails feeds 150 dogs every day and has sterilised around 300 canines. The group has also rescued and re-homed about 100 starving and discarded dogs and puppies. The challenge is unending. So we're thankful for small victories; for every kilogram gained by every rake-thin rescue; every human who makes room in their lives to foster or adopt; for more wagging tails in the world and fewer blighted births. Mostly, we're grateful for the feeling that comes from doing something thankless.

Thank you, Thula, for finding me and shaping my life into something more meaningful. You've shown me what beauty really is. And what it isn't. It's not found in pretty pictures or pedigreed people with neatly lacquered nails. In truth, it lives in life's bent and broken things; those that build you up and break your heart with their simplicity. Like health, and love, and squirrels, and tennis balls. And a pair of loyal eyes that follow you around the room. Thank you, Thula, for you. **Q**

Justine Joseph is a freelance writer and editor, and founding member of African Tails.



Celebrities lent their faces to the cause. From top: Farryl Purkiss with Didi; Vanessa Marawa with Beethoven; Janez Vermeiren with Max; and Rouxmia Bougas with Basco

Beauties and their Braks

In June 2008 some of South Africa's most beautiful people gathered for a photo shoot at the Old Biscuit Mill, Cape Town.

- **THE PHOTOGRAPHER:** Former international model Josie Borain.
- **THE PROJECT:** The 2009 African Tails Calendar, proudly sponsored by Pedigree - featuring African Tails' most recent rescued dogs and puppies.
- **THE AIM:** To raise funds, and show the world what a scruffy street dog can become with a new home and beginning, and a lot of love.
- **THE 2009 CALENDAR** will celebrate the inner, and outer, beauty of the *brak*. That's why this magnificent group of canine models share the stage with human models, celebrities, dancers and performers; impressive people, blessed with both the outer beauty that secures star quality, and the inner beauty that stands behind a cause.
- **THE LINE-UP** includes presenters Jeannie D and Janez Vermeiren, model and *Survivor* winner Vanessa Marawa, *Dans! Dans! Dans!* finalist Yarisha Singh, ballerina Laura Bosenberg and musician Farryl Purkiss. Every calendar sold covers the cost of sterilising one dog.
- **ACCORDING TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATION**, an unsterilised female can give rise to about 4,000 dogs over a period of seven years. So every calendar literally saves thousands of dogs from a life of suffering on the street.
- **THE 2009 AFRICAN TAILS CALENDAR** is on sale from November 2008 at Wordsworth Books, Helon Melon and selected Exclusive Books, vets and pet shops. For nationwide orders or more information on African Tails, e-mail contact@africantails.co.za or visit africantails.co.za

