

BRIGHT LIGHTS, BIG PUPPY

When most people think of a “city dog,” they don’t imagine a Great Dane—but for the Gunnarsons, city living wouldn’t be the same without their king-size canine.

Brian and Melissa Gunnarson spent years searching for a place they could call their forever home.

“We moved here from Chicago,” says Melissa. “Before that we were in Virginia. We’ve been in Seattle for over ten years now, and I think this is going to be home.”

However, despite finding a city to call their own, their family still didn’t feel complete. Then, along came Freyja.





Reflection leads to realization

Growing up on a farm, big dogs had been a big part of Brian's childhood—a part that he missed as an adult. Melissa, on the other hand, didn't grow up around dogs.

"Brian wanted to get a dog for a long time," she says. "And I always was like, 'Well no, we'll get a dog when we move to a bigger house,' or 'No, we'll get a dog when'... fill in the blank."

But a trip spent walking the El Camino de Santiago inspired a change of heart for Melissa.

"El Camino is a 500-mile pilgrimage in Spain," she explains. "It's just like walking and praying, and it was just this really great time of reflection. I came back super Zen, and I was like, 'We should be happy now. We should get a dog now.'"

Go big or go home

With Melissa on board, the Gunnarsons set to work preparing their lives (and their home) for a new addition. However, they didn't envision just any lapdog—Brian and Melissa wanted a Great Dane.

Full-grown Great Danes can weigh between 110 and 175 pounds and stand more than 3 feet tall at the shoulder. The largest Danes clock in around 200 lbs. They are—it can't be stressed enough—very big animals. All that didn't matter to the Gunnarsons.

"We both just loved how they looked. They're such a majestic, gorgeous breed," says Melissa.

"They just look like they're very gentle," adds Brian. "When we got to know the breed more, we discovered that they're just fabulous dogs. I don't know if I would have another breed at this point."

Enter: Freyja

The Gunnarsons searched at local rescues with no luck. So when they heard about a litter of Dane puppies at a local breeder that needed a home, they jumped at the chance to meet the pups.

"They were yelping and chirping and jumping on both of us—like, cuteness overload. After about 15 minutes, all that puppy energy diffused, and they went back to their little beds. The one remainder was Freyja, and she stayed at my feet and she fell asleep," recalls Brian, just before his voice breaks. "I'm going to get all teary."

"Yeah," Melissa chimes in. "He's crying already."

A lifelong connection was made, and within weeks Freyja (pronounced "fray-uh") had a new fur-ever home with the Gunnarsons.

Little did Brian and Melissa know at the time, adding Freyja to their lives would introduce them to a whole new community in their own backyard.

Big dog in the big city

Having a big dog in a city isn't easy. It's not uncommon for large breed owners to host "meetups" to build a network



with other owners around their shared experiences—and, of course, their passion for their pets.

“We were really lucky that we got connected with a Great Dane community in Seattle, and so there was a lot of Great Dane meetups that we went to,” says Melissa.

Brian says, “We became friends with some of the other owners, and it was really funny because one of the other owners—her dog was three months older than Freyja—had vetted everything in terms of ‘this is a good vet... this is a good place to take her for any boarding needs... this is a good dog walker.’ So, we had the trail totally blazed for us.”

These meetups are great for the owners, but equally important, they are a way for the dogs to connect with pups of comparable size.

“So, her first birthday party, she had it at the lake,” recalls Melissa. “We had cupcakes for people, and then pupcakes for the dogs. It was mostly her dog walker and a couple of small friends, including Dudley. Dudley came for her first birthday party.”

“Freyja’s boyfriend’s name is Dudley,” Brian interjects.

“So,” Melissa continues, “all the dogs came, they all got to wear the birthday hats, we took some pictures. They went swimming at the river and they go chasing each other in the grass. We usually invite Great Danes, but our Danes sometimes have brothers and sisters that are smaller dogs, and that’s okay. But Great Danes play special with each other.”

Santa Paws’s favorite

The Gunnarsons’ love of celebrations doesn’t end with dog birthday parties; it spills over into every vacation and holiday—particularly Christmas. Freyja is regularly featured on the family holiday card and enjoys opening her own gifts.

“Freyja is part of the family, so she has her own stocking,” says Brian. He adds, “Santa Paws brings her something each year because she’s always on the ‘Nice’ list. Sometimes it’s treats and sometimes it’s toys—usually it’s both!”

In fact, the sweet Great Dane goes out of her way to avoid the “Naughty” list: Brian notes, “She’s very respectful of family heirlooms and old ornaments. She leaves the Christmas tree alone.”

And true to the enlightened way in which Melissa and Brian came to their decision to add a dog to their family, Freyja continues to spur them toward mindfulness.

“Freyja grounds us in the value to live in the moment and to enjoy all parts of life,” reflects Brian. “She’s a great reminder to not take ourselves too seriously.”

Staying healthy and happy

Something the Gunnarsons do take seriously, however, is Freyja’s health. Some members of the Seattle Great Dane community warned them about potentially deadly health problems these majestic dogs face.

“One of the biggest health concerns for Great Danes is bloat. It kills large breeds, not just Great Danes, but Labs, huskies, some other large breeds,” explains Brian. “In short, their stomach isn’t attached to the inside of their abdominal wall. If they eat really fast, either the esophagus or the small intestine can tie around the stomach, and that can cause the blood to shut off. It’s incredibly painful and they die pretty quickly unless you get into an emergency surgery.” Thankfully, veterinarians can now prevent bloat with a simple surgery.

“Often when Dane owners get their Danes spayed or neutered, they’ll do a stomach-tacking called a gastropexy, since they’re already under general anesthesia,” Brian continues. “It cuts down the likelihood of stomach torsion by about 97 percent. So, when she got fixed, she also got her gastropexy—and she’s been doing great.”





Finding the right pet community for you and your pet



Help when it matters most

Brian notes, “What was nice about engaging with Nationwide insurance is that we were able to make that choice for her and not have to worry about the money. The price of it out of pocket would be pretty large.”

Melissa adds, “Yeah, we probably wouldn’t have been able to afford both procedures at once without the Nationwide insurance, and that would have put her at more risk if we had to do the spay, save up, and then do the gastropexy. Plus, she would have had to be put under twice. So, it was good.”

An ounce of preparation

“We get everything from Freyja’s heartworm to her immunizations, and everything gets covered,” Brian says, grateful. “Because we’re kind of new at this, we’ll also call the vethelpline for advice when we need it. What’s great is they’ll even call me back to check and see if Freyja is feeling better.

“I will spend all of our money on Freyja, right? But, having pet insurance means that we can provide the care that she needs without worrying about going broke—it’s good for her, it’s good for us.” 🐾

Pet communities are more than just play groups. They’re where owners share hard-won knowledge on everything from good vets to dog walkers and beyond. How do you find the right meetup?

- Tap into your existing pet friend network for suggestions. Alternately, search your dog’s breed or size and “meetup near me” online
- Consider visiting the group without your dog to test out the waters. Is a meetup well suited to your dog’s size and temperament?
- Even fun, playful meetups can lead to injuries. Pet insurance can help protect you from unexpected vet bills

For more pet safety tips and articles, visit [MyPetHealthZone.com](https://www.mypethealthzone.com)

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