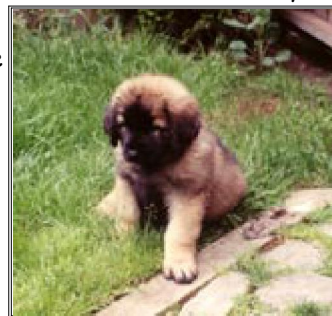


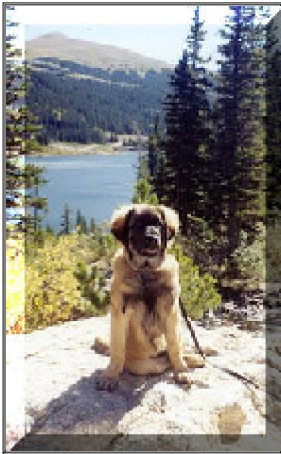
Bergen's Story



"What kind of dog is that?" "She's a Leonberger," I reply. "She's a what?" These are usually the first comments from patients Bergen and I visit together as Delta Society Pet Partners. You see, Bergen is a Leonberger, and most people have never heard of the breed, much less seen a real live Leonberger. So we have become accustomed to lots of questions from patients, family of patients, and of course the staff at the hospital where we visit. The questions about Bergen are quite predictable, as are the comments such as "Wow, you could put a saddle on her!" or "Look at those feet!" or, "How much does she weigh?"

I first learned of the Leonberger on the Internet where the name caught my eye. After reading the breed description I was very interested. However, after reading that these animals are noted for their therapy work, I was hooked. That's just the type of volunteer job I would like; my dog by my side. The journey to find the right Leonberger had begun, and it would take two years before we finally got our Bergen. You see, Leonbergers are considered a rare breed dog and there just aren't very many of them. So, I had to contact a number of breeders and get on their puppy lists, fill out a sheet of questions in order to determine if we and our household were suitable for this dog, and then wait for the puppies to be born. Then the breeder chose the puppy according to the personality traits I requested. Unflappable was one of the words I recall listing as a desirable trait. Well, Bergen's breeder chose well. Even though we had to travel to Canada to get her, she was well worth the long trip. We picked Bergen up in British Columbia early on a May morning in the year 2000. At eight weeks of age she was sixteen pounds of adorable, loving fluff. We bundled her into a sherpa bag, drove her to Seattle, put her under the seat in front of us on the airplane, and off we flew to Colorado! My husband and I crossed our fingers that she wouldn't cry, or otherwise make a commotion during the flight. We needn't have worried. Bergen was indeed unflappable. She was so quiet that the man sitting next to me never even knew there was a puppy two feet away until just before we landed and we opened the zippered end of the mesh bag to reassure her before deplaning. This was indeed a good start!





At twelve weeks of age, Bergen was launched into obedience lessons in preparation for her therapy work. She may not be a star performer in the obedience ring (call her Miss Mellow), but she passed the therapy dog certification test at 20 months of age. I was thrilled, and so proud of her. And so we began our journey together as Pet Partners in a local hospital. At 116 pounds, Bergen is a real eye-opener when she enters a room. She is sure to always elicit interesting comments and is a great distraction from the stress and worry that naturally accompanies a stay in the hospital. As we pass through the front doors of the hospital, we usually encounter people coming and going, and if people don't stop us to pet Bergen, many are curious about her and we are greeted by turned heads, double takes, smiles, and usually some questions. She is quite stunning in her little green Pet Partners vest, with her big, long, lion-colored body and huge feet. In fact, our

beautiful Bergen is featured as the February Leonberger in the 2004 Leonberger calendar! But her sweet face just naturally melts many a heart even before we get to the volunteer office where we sign in, and Bergen gets her treat, before setting out for the elevators and the ride to the floor on which we visit.

We sign in on the floor, and after giving "therapy" to the staff, which I think may be rated just as important as therapy for the patients, we move on down the hall to the first room to visit. Seeing the faces of the patients light up when we first come around the doorway and into the room, is priceless. Some know a dog is coming to visit, but most are not expecting this gentle giant that is Lejon Bergen von der Lowenhohle!



Rarely is there a silence or difficulty starting a conversation, because Bergen is the center from the start as she approaches the bed for a pet. The questions about her naturally tumble out of the patients and our visit begins. And so does the forgetting, if only for a short time, about worries and aches and pains, and about the numerous stressful things that weigh patients down in the hospital setting. Bergen is the reason. I am humbled by how much her visits mean; by how patient and gentle she is. We get comments like, "You've been a real day brightener," (from a prisoner in a room with a guard), or "I was feeling so down before you came. I feel so much better now," or "I'm not really a dog person, (this is so rare) but, what kind of a dog is she? Where is this breed from? How much does she weigh?" and then, "May I pet her?" "Of course," I say. One patient was



feeling very low. She loved dogs and so we were asked to visit her. She talked to Bergen a little, and suddenly she threw her arms around Bergen and began to sob. Bergen sat there very patiently, not moving, until the moment passed. This is her job, of course, and she does it well.

And, she is remembered. I was recently approached by a staff member who came up to greet Bergen and suddenly remembered that there was a person with her. She said "I remember Bergen's name, but I don't remember yours!" That's o.k. with me. Bergen is the reason we are there. She has a job to do and she carries her load easily. I'm just very proud to be her silent partner!



Editor's Note: *To know Nikki and Bergen is to know a Pet Partners team that is deeply committed and dedicated to making a difference with animal-assisted activities/therapy. They are graduates from our first Denver Pet Partners training class and have been a stable and reliable team over the past 2 years of regular visits at Swedish Medical Center. In her modesty, Nikki did not mention in her story that Bergen recently earned the valued Leonberger Therapy Award from the Leonberger Club of America and the right to the title of "LTA" after her name. Bergen certainly deserves to wear her LTA patch on her Delta vest with pride.*

Just this week, while Bergen was visiting a young heart patient in the Progressive Care Unit, his nurse excitedly flagged Nikki down when they left his room to tell her that this patient's heart rate had dropped from 113 to 98 while they were visiting!

The word, "bergen" in German means mountains. The word "mountain" conjures up images of majestic peaks and awesome beauty, but also of a quiet, very stable presence. This is you Bergen, and more, because you have a wonderful loving and giving nature that acts as salve to a person's malady and leaves them a better person for having had a visit from you. Thank you, Nikki and Bergen for all you do to promote the human-animal bond.