

Elena and Moses' Story



It was seven years ago that Moses Titan came into my life, but I remember it as if it was yesterday. In fact, I still get goose bumps thinking about the miracle of me finding him . . . and about all the lives that Moses has touched and will continue to touch in his lifetime.

Moses was just a tiny puppy, a few months old, when he somehow became homeless, wandering in rural Douglas County, hungry and alone. Over the next few weeks, his legs began to bow inward with malnutrition and his puppy body was reduced to skin and bones. By the time I found him, he was just a skeleton with skin, with sores and bare patches covering his ravaged body.

I was driving north on S. Santa Fe Drive, between Sedalia and Highlands Ranch, on that cold Christmas Eve day 3003, heading to work. As I sped by on that 2-lane road, for some reason I spied out of the corner of my eye what looked like the outline of the top of a dog's head -- down the embankment by the road and nearly invisible in the tall grass. I debated whether to stop to check if there was indeed a dog there, or to assume I must have imagined it; I erred on the side of caution and pulled over, reversing back about 50 feet or so feet to the area I thought I saw a dog's head outline. When I got out for a look and walked over to the embankment, there he was: a tiny black puppy, emaciated, motionless, and sitting stoically with a dazed expression on his tiny face. I have never in my life seen any creature look so hideous -- and yet my heart instantly went out to him. I reached down and picked him up and he was totally confused and unresponsive. When I placed him inside my Jeep, his tail wagged briefly and he then immediately collapsed into a deep sleep. I was elated and horrified at the same time, shocked by the randomness of finding him and worried about his hideous condition and what to do with him. Ultimately, he spent the day getting a much needed bath, learning to drink water, getting his deep leg gash treated and bandaged and enjoying meals in front of the fireplace. It was a magical awakening.

As Moses slowly healed over the next few months, with much veterinary care and loving kindness, his fabulous, good-natured temperament blossomed. He became a boisterous, happy fellow, simply in love with life. His demeanor emerged as a gentle, mellow, and sweet spirit who thrives on human

companionship. Being a licensed clinical social worker, I began to think about how I could use Moses in my work with clients. I became convinced that there was a special reason Moses survived and that it was my job to help him fulfill his life calling. A bit of internet research and a few phone calls and we were on our way!

At one year of age, Moses became a registered therapy dog with Denver Pet Partners (now American Humane). At that time, I was working as a home hospice social worker and so I began taking Moses on home visits with some of my patients. I can still picture how one particular patient's face would light up when Moses arrived. Sadly, Moses' work with hospice came to a close when I switched jobs later that year and began working in a cubicle. Shortly thereafter, I became pregnant and so Moses' volunteer work again took a backseat as our family grew to include two little girls, who adore Moses. By the time my youngest was becoming more independent, I realized that it was time to get back to my work with Moses. I could tell he missed the work – he was so eager to be at my side constantly and was delighted to meet new people and engage in life at every opportunity! Moreover, I knew that if I did not pursue therapy dog work with him, it would be one of my biggest life regrets. And so, in late 2010, Moses once again passed his tests and became a registered therapy dog, with me as his enthusiastic handler.

In choosing where to volunteer with Moses, I decided I wanted to provide this service to clients at the agency I worked, Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network. It seemed a natural choice as I have a deep appreciation for the broad range of programs the agency provides -- and because I saw it as an opportunity to bring this fabulous treatment modality to the agency! Ultimately, Moses and I began volunteering at Santa Fe House, a residential program that helps people with serious mental illness (and often legal charges) work toward recovery and building healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.

Moses and I visit the residents at Santa Fe House (coincidentally, just a few miles north of where I originally found Moses) twice a month in the evening. From the moment we arrive, there are faces looking for Moses, eagerly awaiting his company. Moses greets everyone with a tail wag, walking right up to say hello and receive affection. As I introduce Moses and talk with the residents, I often share Moses' story. So often, their identification with Moses' tragic past is palpable; he is an inspiration for those who suffer and those who dream of a better life. I also regularly share the fact that Moses has thyroid disease and has to take a pill twice a day to keep healthy; this is another similarity to these residents who are on a daily regimen of psychiatric medications to ease their mental health symptoms.

One time, I shared Moses' story with a young man who was enjoying a long, visit with Moses. Later, as Moses and I were on our way out, this same young man ran back to give Moses one last snuggle. As he petted him lovingly, I heard him say: "Moses, you were homeless once too." For this young man who had come from a jail to take part in the Mental Health Court program and live at the residential program, there was a deeply personal connection with Moses as a fellow being who had once been "homeless" and now has a good life. That simple sentiment spoke volumes to me as powerful connection between these two – and the therapeutic power of Moses presence and story.

One resident regularly enjoys getting down on the floor and spooning with Moses as they enjoy a remarkable bond, showering each other with affection! This is a person who I learned has had a very

difficult life, with very limited connections to other people and no solid family connection as well. Seeing this man connect with Moses in such a physically and emotionally solid manner is immensely satisfying to witness.

On our most recent visit to Santa Fe House, one resident who often spend lots of time with Moses announced “I’m not petting Moses today” when we arrived. I supportively replied “Sure, that’s fine -- but if you change your mind, we’ll be right here.” About 15 minutes later when the room cleared out a little, this man came back and pulled up a chair next to me and Moses. He seemed tentative about touching Moses, but as Moses warmly sat and gazed at him, he reached out and began petting Moses on the head and neck. I could see how this gentleman began to soften and relax into the connection. A few minutes later as I sat by quietly, I saw him take Moses head lovingly in both hands. As he stared into Moses gentle face, he spoke to him: “Moses you are such a good boy. You always come here to visit us. You always do what you say you will. You always follow through.” It was an amazingly deep, powerful moment and I felt like I was intruding on a profoundly personal conversation. The words resonated with meaning and emotion – and it was a moment of sheer bliss for me as I sat their awed, quietly enabling Moses to work his magic with human hearts.

Volunteering with Moses at Santa Fe House is an amazing gift. Each and every time we go, it is profoundly inspirational and touching to see the power of Moses’ gentle spirit and his unconditional love. I am profoundly grateful to Diana McQuarrie, Amy McCullough, Lisa Curran, Cynthia Hellman and the entire team at American Humane for teaching, guiding, and empowering Moses to be able to do this amazing work. I am also profoundly grateful to the fabulous leadership (and all my wonderful colleagues!) at Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network who have welcomed Moses and me with open arms and have embraced the concept of Animal-Assisted Therapy as an innovative, effective, and powerful treatment modality for our clients.

