

Tiki and Kishu's Story



Tiki and Kishu are Lhasa Apso dogs whose ancestors came to the United States in the early 20th century from the exotic, mysterious mountain country of Tibet. While my dogs may not be world travelers themselves, they were only eight weeks old during their first car trip from the far away land of Nebraska to Colorado.

Having once had German Shorthaired Pointers, it was decided that smaller dogs would be a good future choice. It was quite a culture shock to go from big short-haired dogs to little long-haired dogs! Yet within thirty seconds after seeing them, they had me wrapped around their little paws. Even then I thought about future participation in a therapy

dog program as I watched them bouncing off the walls. Hardly candidates for therapy work at that point!

Five years later, the impetus to look into a therapy dog program came from a friend. She had been the liaison between Denver Pet Partners, a Delta Society affiliate, and the assisted-living facility where she resided. When she passed away, several Denver Pet Partners with their certified therapy dogs were at her funeral. I was impressed with the handlers and their dogs so I decided to find out more about the visiting-dog program which my friend had successfully worked so hard to set up at her residence. I wanted to do something besides work (necessary to put food on the table) and clean house (not my idea of a fun time). By then Kishu and Tiki had become such a big part of my life that I wanted to do something extra which also involved them. Maybe Delta Society held the answer.

I went to a Denver Pet Partners monthly meeting and found out that becoming a Pet Partner might fulfill my desire to do something with the dogs and also help other people in some way. That was the beginning of this wonderful journey.

Soon my dogs and I were pre-screened for therapy work. Kishu and I passed "with reservations". Tiki and I were rated as "not ready". (Tiki thought the "down" command didn't apply to him. Afterwards he and I had a long discussion about who was the leader of the pack!)



Next I attended the two-day Workshop for people, followed by the Evaluation which Kishu and I passed, becoming a certified team in September 2005. Soon he and I began visiting at Fletcher-Miller Special School in Jefferson County, a public school for severely disabled students. When we were in the car after our first visit Kishu immediately settled down in the passenger seat to sleep. I reached over, patted him and told him how proud I was of him. He opened his eyes and looked at me as if to say "I've had enough people touch me today". Then he got up and moved to the back seat out of my reach.

The students at Fletcher- Miller quickly became "Kishu's kids". He would sleep while enroute but when we arrived he could hardly wait to see "his kids".

The following March Tiki and I passed our Evaluation. (Yes, he finally decided that when I said "down" it really did apply to him.)

Now Tiki and Kishu take turns visiting at Swedish Hospital and at Fletcher- Miller, as well as being involved in other DPP activities. We participate in the Englewood Library PAWS to Read program, attended the Heritage Hills Fun Run and help with Workshops.

I think they have a chalkboard somewhere to keep track of whose turn it is to go. It's okay if one dog doesn't get to go this time - but he better get to go next time!

When Tiki visited at Fletcher-Miller the first time, Kishu's nose was "bent out of shape." He was indignant! After all, those were HIS kids - not Tiki's kids. I thought it was just my imagination that Kishu was upset during his next visit, but the staff also commented on Kishu's "standoffish behavior". In fact, it took several weeks before his attitude returned to normal.



During Fletcher-Miller visits there aren't many BIG student reactions like big smiles, loud laughter, or hands clapped. There many little things like a twinkle in the eye or a slight smile expressing happiness. The teachers say that when told THIS is "dog day" the students are much calmer and more attentive.

During the Library Class at F-M a video is usually shown. On "dog day" WE become the video, become other stimuli on that day - another voice in the room, the dogs are something different for the kids to touch, feel and see.

In the F-M Sensory Class a therapist might be working with one of the students whose goal is to hold his head up for 30 minutes. Kishu (or Tiki) will sit by the student, nosing small human cheeks and ears until the student lifts his head. This happens over and over followed by gentle child laughter. This is just one example of how the dogs are able to enhance a therapist's work.

One day a teacher was holding a little girl in a sitting position on the floor. Three of us adults were trying to curtail hands and feet from simultaneously kicking and pulling hair. Tiki lay close to the student as the teacher guided little hands to touch and stroke him. The child kept trying to grab Tiki's hair, apparently succeeding at one point evidenced by doggy ear hair on the floor. He made no indication this had happened. Was I proud of him? You bet!

Another time a little boy needed to lie on his side for while. Bolsters were positioned behind his back and in front to help him stay on his side. Kishu figured that a child on the floor means that child needs some Kishu snuggle time. Kishu tried and tried to sneak in between the bolsters and the little boy but sticky stuff on the bolsters prevents movement even though the child wiggles and squirms. Finally Kishu gave up and just lay near the boy's head. Guess he figured that was as close as he was going to get.

When I think that Kishu (or Tiki) isn't interacting with a student is when the dog is doing exactly what is needed; snuggling or giving incentive to hold up a head or just providing companionship. The dog knows much better than I what his job is on any particular day.

Last school year at F-M the staff and students decorated ceramic tiles to be placed on the Office and main entrance walls. Tiki and Kishu decorated tiles with their paw prints. What an honor it is for the dogs to be included as a permanent part of the Fletcher- Miller family!

When visiting at Swedish Hospital, Tiki and Kishu can't understand why they can't go through every doorway for they are certain there is someone who absolutely must see them.

One patient was quite excited to see a dog. During our conversation, she related telling her family and friends that she wasn't permitted have visitors. Actually that wasn't a doctor's orders; she just didn't want to see anyone. But, she was "Sooo" glad to see Tiki! She told me that I could leave Tiki, come back to get him later, meanwhile she would take good care of him!

Having knocked on a patient's door, asking if she wanted a puppy visit, the patient "guessed it would be okay for a minute or two". The accompanying big sigh indicated indifference but willingness to pet a dog a couple of times. After the usual four or five- minute visit stretched into fifteen she didn't want Tiki to leave.

Another day at Swedish, I asked a nurse exiting a room if the patient would like to see a dog. Initially saying, "No, she is in restraints" the nurse suggested we could try. We didn't know what we would find on the other side of the door. I introduced myself and my Pet Partner and asked if she would like to see a dog. She said, "Yes", was very pleasant, quite enamored with Kishu, then asked if we were friends of her family and had they asked us to come. I told they hadn't that we were volunteers visiting patients. You could see her visibly relax. It was a relief to her that someone came to visit her without family prompting. Then we talked about my hair, her hair, the hair of everyone in the universe as well as the weather and the sun. She said that yesterday wasn't a good day, today was much better since Kishu had come to see her, while touching Kishu with her unrestrained fingertips and commenting about his being a nice dog.

Precious snippets emerged from other Swedish Hospital visits. I didn't understand a gentleman's speech, but clearly understood his enormous grin as he petted Tiki. Another man immediately invited Tiki to return for another enjoyable visit. One fellow commented that Tiki's tail going round and round was Tiki winding himself up.

Sometimes in the hospital it's the visitors who need to see the dog. Often they don't know about what "Mom or Dad" want, but that they want a visit themselves. I am told how seeing Tiki or Kishu has made a big positive difference for their family member or friend. Visitors and patients often remember having seen one or both dogs, recalling names, colors and details of the original visit. The impact of a typical five-minute visit results in comments about how wonderful and unexpected are the dogs, or having seen therapy dogs on TV but never expecting to actually see one themselves.

The staff at Fletcher-Miller Special School and the staff at Swedish Hospital support our therapy dog visits in many ways. It seems as important for those staff members to get their own share of puppy love . . . Kishu and Tiki are always more than glad to oblige.

One patient at Swedish told Tiki "You have the best job in the whole World." Actually, we ALL do.

