

## *Amy and Bailey's Story*



### **“You Just Haven’t Met the Right Dog”**

That’s what my husband said to me shortly after we bought our first house in North Carolina and he was ready for a dog. He’d grown up with dogs and was an avid animal lover. I, on the other hand, never had a pet growing up and had been bitten by several dogs.

It started when I was four years old at a friend’s house and their English Sheepdog bit me in the face. It happened again when I was in middle school and walking home from a friend’s house - a dog charged into the street when I was passing by and attached himself to my leg. And finally, another friend’s

Rottweiler bit me right in the behind. Needless to say, I was terrified of dogs.

My husband wanted to get a rescue and ensured me that we would meet as many dogs as it took until we found one that didn’t scare me. He was adamant that my experiences weren’t a reflection on the dogs so much as a reflection on the owner’s behavior, i.e. a lack of training and socialization for the dogs. We decided to visit the local Golden Retriever rescues since through our research, we’d learned that Golden Retrievers are great family dogs and easily trained.

We went to the Golden Retriever Rescue of the Carolinas and one after one, the rescue worker would let a Golden out of the kennel and s/he would bound up to me and jump up, scaring me half to death. In my inexperience, I didn’t know how to read body language and didn’t know that this was a sign of excitement and happiness, as opposed to aggression. I told my husband I didn’t think that this was going to work. We went home that day with the promise from the rescue worker that they would call us when they got the right Golden in for us.

Sure enough, a few weeks later, the rescue called and arranged for us to meet another dog – a three-year-old female named Bailey. We met the foster family at a park and when we arrived, they let the dog out of their car and handed my husband a tennis ball. “She loves to chase the ball. Go ahead and throw it,” the foster family said. My husband threw the ball and Bailey took off after it, catching it beautifully. “That’s an athletic dog,” my husband said admiringly. The next thing that happened is what made the difference. After Bailey retrieved the tennis ball, she came back to the group of us that were watching and came right up to me. She walked up slowly to me and leaned, placing her head gently against my leg. “I found her!” I said.

My life changed quite a bit after meeting Bailey. She was such a sweet, docile dog, I thought surely there must be a way I can share her with other people. I'd heard about people bringing their dogs to hospitals to comfort patients and I thought with her gentle nature, Bailey would be perfect for it. I contacted the local hospital and they told me I was talking about "animal-assisted therapy" and if I completed training and an evaluation, I would be able to bring Bailey to the hospital.



We completed our training and successfully completed the evaluation and we began visiting the local hospital, long-term care facilities, hospice and a group home for adolescents. What a magical experience to be able to witness how Bailey could make someone's face light up. It was the most rewarding experience I'd ever had.

When my husband's job brought us to Denver, CO, I immediately researched local animal-assisted therapy organizations so Bailey and I could continue our service. I found American Humane Association's Animal-Assisted Therapy program (then known as Denver Pet Partners) and signed up for their training the very weekend I arrived in town. American Humane's training took our experience to a whole new level. The knowledge I gained not only enhanced my relationship with Bailey, but also ensured that we were following the highest standards of practice in the field for the safety of all involved. I couldn't believe the difference Bailey made in people's lives – she taught, she inspired, she comforted, she cheered up, and overall, she showed unconditional love to everyone she met.



After eight years of AAA/T visits, there are so many memories and special stories that it's difficult to choose just one. My favorite place to visit was the University of Colorado Hospital's inpatient psychiatric unit which has subsequently closed. The unit was known as "the ER of mental health" in that the adult patients were admitted due to a risk in their behavior and the average stay was only a few days until the patient was stabilized and transferred to a lower level of care. That's where we met "Gustavo." We actually saw Gustavo a few different times because he continued to try to take his own life – the last time by jumping off a three story building. Gustavo's face would light up when he saw Bailey and the therapist and I talked a lot about what it takes for Bailey to be safe, healthy and happy, impressing upon the similarities to Gustavo's life. Gustavo continued to talk about Bailey during his individual counseling sessions and I knew she had made an impression when he was asked what person he would most like to be like and he answered, "Bailey!"

I happened to be in the right place at the right time. I had a career in advertising and communication, but learned that American Humane was hiring a Program Manager for their Animal-Assisted Therapy program. Luckily, I received the job. I've come a long way from being afraid of a happy Golden who was excited to see me. I became a licensed animal-assisted therapy instructor and evaluator and now help people like me learn how to safely and effectively conduct animal-assisted therapy with their pet.

It's amazing to think how one Golden Retriever could change me from being petrified of dogs to having great respect and love for all animals. One Golden Retriever changed my career path from advertising to animal-assisted therapy. And that Golden Retriever has inspired me once again to go back to school to get my Ph.D. so I can study the powerful benefits of the human-animal bond.

My husband was right, I just hadn't met the right dog. Now that I have, my life has been enhanced so much and I feel truly blessed to have her as my partner. Thank you, Bailey – I love you!

