



## *Susan Horecki and Lucy*



In the winter of 2009 I happened across an article in the Denver Post about a literacy program in the Douglas County Public Libraries. Pets reading with children....hmmm....interesting, I'd never heard of such a thing!

Candidly knowing nothing about Animal Assisted Activities and Therapies, my motives were not altogether altruistic. You see, the idea of volunteering with our family pet seemed like a convenient way to do something "nice" for others and also to fill some calendar spaces as a soon-to-be empty nester. I also imagined that by participating in volunteer activities with 5-year-old Lucy, I might enjoy a needed distraction from the stress of my corporate career. Sounds more self-centered, wouldn't you say?

As it turns out the journey of the last few

years has and did prove to be the very things I was looking for at the time, but so very much more indeed!

So with all the confidence of Lucy's amazing personality, good manners, and time in my schedule for volunteer activities; I did make a call to the library. I assumed that this conversation would result in Lucy and I showing up for duty in short order. Little did I know there was a "process" and "steps" to take....who knew that to volunteer required extra effort?!

With referrals to both DPP and another AAI organization, I began to take a bit more seriously that which I was about to get involved with. One thing that struck me then was that the other organization really had no formal training, you simply met with a representative and they would indicate whether your animal was suitable for the library (or elsewhere I suppose). At the same time I learned that DPP hosted a two-day, handler workshop and it was required that a team pass an evaluation later in order to be at the library. Though it was tempting to take the easy way out, it occurred to me that I might just benefit

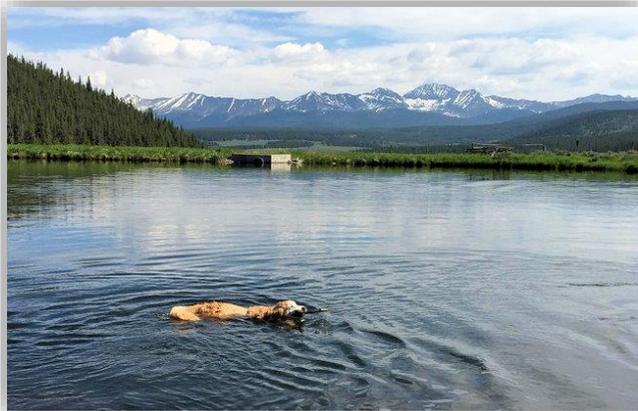




from learning more about the roles and responsibilities of a schooled and credible team.

Like so many of you, handler workshop changed my way of thinking about my partner and volunteerism in general. Like so many of you, getting to evaluation day and through it was not without a few nerves (okay a lot of nerves). Though we did pass our evaluation in July of 2009, largely because of Lucy's abilities, there were evaluator comments about my performance that I have since come to appreciate and think about often.

I never did get back to the library as I was exposed to the idea of volunteering at Life Care Center of Littleton. LCCL is an assisted living facility as well as a short-term rehabilitation center for individuals recovering from surgeries, strokes, and other circumstances. Lucy and I started here by visiting residents in their rooms and common areas, but soon after began working with individuals in physical therapy alongside a professional therapist.



For 6 years and most Sunday mornings, Lucy has had the great pleasure to retrieve tossed toys, play tug of war, take walks, get brushed, and generally loved on by clients and staff alike. She telepaths to me that she will never forget the look on my face during our first solo visit. You see, the client when introduced to Lucy and I proceeded to say that she didn't like dogs (even though the therapists are supposed to discover suitability prior to a session). My immediate reaction was one of

despair and I'm sure it showed, it was my first visit by myself! In a moment I recovered (I'm certain Lucy's calm nature helped) and I was able to respond that Lucy does not really consider herself to be canine so we would all get along just fine. And we did.

Though the activities we use seem like play to outsiders, they are designed to help our clients feel stronger physically and motivated and/or distracted to make the most of a physical therapy session. As you might imagine, the effort needed to recover or improve from injury or disease varies as does the emotional state of the individuals. The two are often linked.

I could bend your ears for hours with stories of tears and laughter, triumph of mind over circumstance, and miraculous moments. Suffice it to say that there is rarely a Sunday that I have not been amazed by Lucy's ability to motivate and maybe more importantly, comfort and love a person (or their family) that is trying to heal. Though LCCL has been our constant, I have learned and continue to learn important life lessons from Lucy and others here and at the other facilities we serve.

Something that I never expected as I got started in the world of AAI and as a member of DPP is how many incredible people and partners I would meet and that their experiences would be so important to our growth as a team personally.

## *DPP Team of the Month (July 2015)*

DENVER PET PARTNERS



I have been the benefactor of shadowing several experienced DPP handlers in their unique environments. This has helped me to be realistic when thinking about my own ambitions for new and different visit opportunities as well as helping to advise and counsel other members as Program Director. The important lesson is to think about our partners' comfort and abilities first and the human desire to serve second. Thank-you to each for being such important teachers!

It has also been my great pleasure to have handlers shadow Lucy and I and vice versa. Seeing programs through a new set of eyes and tales certainly causes one to think about keeping skills current and professional. Geez, it's really incredible to see such dedicated and enthusiastic teams! What a joy it is to witness a human and animal partnership that brings its own version of healing, comfort, and miracles to any program. To each team, thank-you!

I will also thank the Denver Pet Partners organization as being a beacon for AAI and especially for clueless people like me (especially in 2009).

So from an article in 2009 until now? I have learned that the impact of AAI is profoundly important to the individuals, the professionals, and the facilities we serve. All count on us to be there and success is measured by way of a smile, a positive emotion, or a goal/task achieved. It is impossible to miss that the presence of a pet partner (Lucy or yours) played a key role in the event. Being an eye-witness to this causes one's focus to change from participating in a "nice thing to do" to that of responsibility to these activities and building awareness toward the advancement and benefits of the Human-Animal Bond through AAI.

I celebrate our clients and animal heroes, I celebrate you! I love Lucy!

