

Lesley Williams and Darwin



I often think about the day I first met Darwin, and what a lucky day that was for me. It was 2008 and the first day of a new annual program. The Denver Municipal Shelter takes a selection of dogs and cats to one of the City buildings at lunch time every Friday in October to promote adoptions. I had lost my 13 year old German Shepherd just nine months earlier and wasn't ready for a new dog, so I had no concerns about being tempted by any of the soulful eyes and wagging tails I was about to see. But fate had other ideas. I had decided that when I was ready to get another dog he would have to meet three criteria – be small enough that I could carry him up and down the stairs if he became incapacitated in old age; be suitable for agility; and have the potential to be a therapy dog. So I walked into the room and there he was, my perfect dog, and I was smitten. He was on a leash with one of

the shelter volunteers and was leaping up and down trying to get to every person who walked by, tail wagging frantically, just oozing personality. To cut a long story short, he came home with me that evening. He spent the first couple of hours bouncing off the walls with all the pent up energy of an active 7 month old who had been confined to a small kennel for 3 weeks. The words "Oh my goodness, what on earth have I done!" crossed my mind a few times that first night, only to be immediately driven out when he would land in my lap and cover me with kisses. After a couple of days of exercise and lots of attention, all doubts disappeared and I've never regretted my impetuous decision to adopt him. In fact, I wonder every day how anyone could have given him up. The shelter had no history on him so I don't know the circumstances that led to him being there, but he had obviously been well treated and socialized. Despite this, I soon learned that he had never seen a mirror, heard a toilet flush or climbed a flight of stairs. But he took everything in stride, as he continues to do today. Not much fazes him.



My initial assessment that he would be good at agility and therapy work were confirmed over the following months. Everyone loved him and he loved everyone. By the time he'd graduated from puppy, intermediate, advanced and click-a-trick classes I had realized how truly special he is. German Shepherds have always been my first love and I've owned many over the years growing up in Zimbabwe where I trained and competed in obedience, tracking, guarding and anything else I could find to do with my dog. I never thought I'd have any other breed. Darwin has changed my mind. He is by far the smartest dog I have ever had. According to his DNA test, he is mostly Border Collie with a dash of Rottweiler. I don't see the Rotty in him, but he has all the best characteristics of Border Collies without the obsessive intensity.

In addition to agility, we have discovered Freestyle Dog Dancing. It's really just an opportunity to do tricks to music and is great fun. We briefly tried our hand at Flyball but having dogs flying around in all directions was just too stimulating for this herding dog.



As he approached his 2nd birthday I decided he had matured enough that I could start thinking about animal assisted therapy. I took the American Humane handler training course and we passed our first team evaluation with a Predictable rating. Two years later, on our retest, we achieved the coveted Complex rating.

We began our AAA journey at The Medical Center of Aurora. At the time, no teams were visiting the cardiac wards so I volunteered for this area. We visited there for several months until I realized that this wasn't a good fit for Darwin. The patients tended to be elderly, very ill, and not interested in more than giving him a few pats on the head. He was getting bored. So we stopped visiting for a while. Then a veteran's home opened in my neighborhood and we started going there. This worked better for Darwin and he looked forward to going and meeting the men. Unfortunately they discontinued the program after a few months, and again we found ourselves without a place to visit.

Then we heard about Mt. St. Vincent Children's Home, which is a residential treatment center for neglected and abused children. We have been visiting there on a weekly basis for the past ten months, and have definitely found our AAT home. We meet with 3 of the boys aged between 6 and 10 years, seeing each one separately, with a therapist, for 30 – 45 minutes. It has been wonderful to watch Darwin develop and grow into his role. He rapidly won over the hearts of the staff and now everyone seems to know him. At first he would approach everyone with the same enthusiasm but then he seemed to figure out that he was there for the kids, and he began to pay less attention to the adults and gravitate to the kids. This is significant because when we are out and about and he is not wearing his vest he doesn't show the same preference for kids over adults. After a few visits he bonds with the boys we see regularly and they with him. Learning to trust is an important part of the recovery for these children and they look forward to our visits as much as we do. They are all different of course, and have different needs. The therapist will often give me a heads up on what each child is currently working on in therapy and Darwin is beginning to sense what he needs to do.

Sometimes they are happy and upbeat and we will go outside and they throw a toy or a ball for him. At first he would return it to me, but now he takes it back to the kid and lets them take it from his mouth and throw it again. That is unless Darwin's in the mood for playing Keep-Away which is fun for both of them.

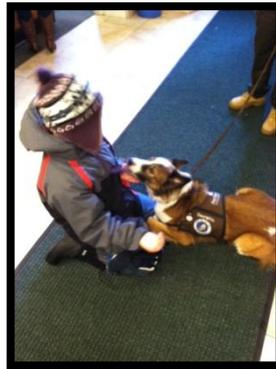
Other times they are feeling down and powerless and we have Darwin do tricks for them. I tell them the commands and hand signals to use and they love being able to make him roll over, sit up, spin, shake hands etc. Their favorite thing is having him weave through their legs. It gives them a much needed sense of achievement and empowerment. This is also something new for Darwin because he has doesn't usually work well for other people. Then sometimes they want to play a board game and we find ways to include Darwin. One day he was lying next to one of the boys and reached out and licked him. The boy said "He's giving me lucky licks" and then went on to win the game and a tradition was born. Now everyone wants Darwin's lucky licks.

After a recent session the therapist pointed out to me that when the boy started talking about his family Darwin had moved close to him and put his head in his lap. I hadn't noticed, but I am learning to pay more attention. I often wonder how many other things he does at appropriate times that escape my attention.

One of our regular boys left the home a few weeks ago, and we started meeting with a new 6 year old boy. On the first session he was very reserved and hardly spoke at all. He sat on a chair and for 10 minutes Darwin sat quietly beside him and the boy's hand never left his body, just gently stroking him and kneading his back. I can't remember the last time Darwin sat still for 10 minutes unless he was asleep! It has been amazing to watch the change in this boy over a series of sessions. He now rushes up to Darwin and hugs him and has a big smile on his face. I know Darwin is not solely responsible for this change, but I do believe he helps.

My favorite part of our visits is the beginning of the first session. The boy and the therapist usually arrive as we are signing in at the reception area. The boy will run in and get down on his knees and Darwin runs over to him,

yanking me away from the sign-in sheet, and goes into a play bow and starts nuzzling him and next thing I know they are rolling around on the floor and the boy is giggling with delight. At this time it's just about a boy and a dog and everything seems right with the world.



For obvious reasons I can't include any photos that show a child's face but, with Mt. St. Vincent's permission, I couldn't resist using a few photos of this special interaction.

We were one of the first, but there are now 8 teams visiting Mt. St. Vincent (not all from DPP). However there is still a great need and the therapist tells me that there are many more kids who want to meet with Darwin, or another dog. If you are looking for a facility to visit, please consider them. Not all the kids need as much interaction as Darwin provides and there is a place for every canine personality. The girls seem to be more inclined to just sit and pet a quiet dog. The therapists at the facility are very good at matching the children with the appropriate dog. The presence of a dog in the room will often help these children talk about subjects that they would otherwise refuse to discuss.

I feel so blessed to have found Darwin. Of course we love all our dogs, but I truly believe that everyone has that one extra special dog (I've heard some people call them their "Heart dog") at some point in their lives and he is mine. Being able to share him and help children and have fun all at the same time is just the icing on the cake.