

## *Phoebe's Story*



*Jen Pearson and Phoebe*

### *The Early Years*

In September 1995, while I was lying in bed with pneumonia, a friend thrust a newspaper at me and said, "Look what I found for you!" A small classified ad announced ten week-old PekePom puppies for sale. So I dragged myself out of bed (against doctor's orders!) and drove through endless miles of Iowa cornfields to check out the puppies. When I arrived at the rather ramshackle farmhouse, I was informed that there was only one puppy left, an all-black female. The woman placed the puppy in the palm of my right hand, changing my life forever. Knowing virtually nothing about dogs at the time, Phoebe's early socialization consisted primarily of being stuffed unceremoniously into the front of my jacket and going everywhere with me. I finally had my own, perfect (only slightly naughty) puppy!

But a few months later, the unthinkable happened. Phoebe got very sick. After a host of tests and biopsies revealed

nothing, the vets diagnosed her with an autoimmune disorder, "most likely Lupus." They gave her anywhere from a month to three years to live, stating she would need a lot of medication for the rest of her life. Unfortunately, she suffered many side effects of the drugs. I had spent thousands of dollars and my dog was still miserable - the medication did not alleviate her symptoms and was causing additional problems. After a lot of crying and praying, I decided to take Phoebe off the drugs and try to give her the best quality of life I could for whatever time she had left.



The timing coincided with a move to Maine to work at Sukee Kennels ([www.sukee.com](http://www.sukee.com)), a prestigious German Shepherd breeding and training facility. With their expertise and under the careful watch of our vet, Phoebe was weaned off all her meds. To everyone's amazement, she defied all the vets and showed immediate improvement, never having a single relapse. For the next few years, Phoebe assisted with the training of many competitive obedience, protection and police dogs by acting as the kennel's resident "Distraction Factor." She has since shared her home with a host of German Shepherds, cats, Chihuahuas, chickens and horses - always remaining the undisputed queen of her domain.

### *The Journey to Delta*



Phoebe has always been perfectly happy to move around the country as I completed several degrees, making new friends (human and canine) everywhere she goes. One memorable day in an acquaintance's home, Phoebe met a man who was confined to a wheelchair due to a severe spinal cord injury. He asked if he could pet her. While I was trying to figure out the best position for her, Phoebe took matters into her own paws,

jumping onto the chair next to him. With extreme care, she then slowly stepped onto his lap, meticulously avoiding every tube, line and bag. He was thrilled; he reported that he couldn't let his own dog onto his lap because it would often bump into or step on his equipment. I knew that day, watching Phoebe so obviously *thinking* about the situation and reacting appropriately, that she was destined for therapy work. I found Delta Society online, enrolled Phoebe in a rewards-based obedience class and began researching AAT in earnest. When the opportunity to complete my Masters in Social Work at the University of Denver presented itself, I knew I had to go. DU was the only MSW program in the country offering an Animal-Assisted Social Work certificate course concurrently with the degree. I located the Denver Pet Partners website and registered for the Pet Partners training course followed by our evaluation. Three weeks to the day of arriving in Colorado, Phoebe - at age 10 - and I passed, earning a Complex Qualification the first time out!

### *Working in Colorado*

We were assigned to the Medical Center of Aurora South's Oncology unit, where Phoebe promptly and predictably won the hearts of everyone she encountered. The height of the beds on that floor often made it challenging for patients to reach down to pet the dogs; Phoebe's small size enabled me to pick her up and position her so they could comfortably touch her. One of my fondest memories of our time at the hospital was a visit to a room that had an armed corrections officer stationed outside who gave us permission to enter. Scarred and heavily tattooed, this intimidating-looking inmate's entire demeanor changed when he saw Phoebe.



He spoke tenderly about his own childhood pet, how he missed animals because he was in prison and how much he appreciated being able to spend time with her. When we left, the guard expressed his surprise over the patient's positive reaction (he had apparently been giving the staff a very hard time).

In addition to official DPP work, Phoebe was approved to visit my internship site, a residential treatment center specializing in equine facilitated psychotherapy for adolescents with conduct disorder and sexually abusive behaviors, helping residents work on appropriate boundaries, healthy touch and relationship skills. She also gave several demonstrations at DU and was allowed to come to some of my classes with me.



### *The Last Great Adventure*

Upon graduation, Phoebe and I headed to New York where I had been offered a social work position in the Green Chimneys Children's Services ([www.greenchimneys.org](http://www.greenchimneys.org)) Therapeutic Day Program, which serves children who have been unsuccessful in public school settings due to behavioral and emotional issues. Several times per week, Phoebe would accompany me to work where she quickly became, in the words of countless children, "the best social worker on campus." The sign on my office door read, "Jen & Phoebe." Kids would seem to materialize out of the air to beeline for her wherever we went, and cries of "Phoebe! Phoebe!" could be heard across the playgrounds, in the halls and from classrooms. Neither were staff immune to her charm;

from housekeeping to farm interns to administration, Phoebe endeared herself across agency departments. She helped children overcoming separation and transition challenges get on and off their buses, provided a safe and unconditional relationship to those struggling with attachment disorders, was a tangible motivation to be accountable about animal abuse histories, and assisted kids with focusing attention and motor-sensory activities. For me, Phoebe offered constant feedback on the emotional state of the children I worked with, often sensing mood swings and emotional instability far more quickly than any person could.

When I made the decision to return home to Maine, the cries of despair from the children and staff were certainly not for me; they were for the little black dog that had touched the hearts of everyone that met her. I think a card inscription from one of the kids eloquently expressed most people's feelings: "To Jen my social worker - I'll miss your dog!"

Not renewing our Pet Partner membership was an extremely tough decision. Phoebe's heart is still very much in the work, and I can see the hope and anticipation in her eyes whenever she sees "her" training bag in the closet. But at almost 12  $\frac{1}{2}$  years old, her eyesight and hearing are a little less than what they once were, and she startles just a bit more easily at loud noises. She has also experienced some adverse reactions to vaccines in the past few years, and my vet has recommended she not receive any more. Phoebe will continue to work in an unofficial capacity around the community as long as she has the desire, so that people can continue to experience the joy she is so good at sharing. For my part, I thank God every day that Phoebe is with me and for the tremendous blessing she has been in my life. She will be pampered and spoiled for the rest of hers! I know that AAT will continue to be a part of me professionally and personally, and I am so fortunate that my journey began with such a special partner. I wish I had discovered Delta Society sooner, but still I have a lifetime of memories from these past two years.

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