

Rigo's Story



Someone told me once that I had a real jewel in Rigo. That statement had a lasting impact on me. Not only have I never forgotten it, it was the impetus for me to research gems to discover what kind of jewel Rigo would be. I found the perfect match – black Onyx. Black Onyx is believed to be associated with healing and protection and since ancient times was worn to defend against negativity and help release emotions such as grief and sorrow. What better description for my therapy dog partner and beloved companion?

I hope you will enjoy reading Rigo's story. I'm sharing excerpts from the story that was published in Teri Pichot's most recent book, "Transformation of the Heart". Teri interviewed me over two years ago but the stories are as fresh as if they happened yesterday and the story truly captures the essence of Rigo. Rigo

continues to enrich my life with his unique companionship and dispense his special brand of healing and goodwill to the many people we interact with daily.

The day Rigo came into my life was the beginning of a tremendous journey that has led to experiences which I otherwise never would have had. Doors have been opened which I never dreamed possible and my adventure with the human-animal bond is deeper beyond imagination. Come and join me for a moment on this journey.....



The date was July 13, 2002. A perfect black Labrador retriever was born with his littermates, after selective breeding and the evaluation of genetic inheritances ensured that he qualified for the perfection of performance demanded from a guide dog. Everything was perfect, and he passed the special aptitude tests that demonstrated that he possessed the superior natural tendencies inherent in a guide dog. At seven weeks of age, he was entrusted to a carefully selected, experienced puppy-raising family that would provide the necessary environment Rigo required to develop into a guide.

It was the family's responsibility to ensure that Rigo learned all the necessary life skills to assume the important job of guiding a blind person. While he had no idea what his future



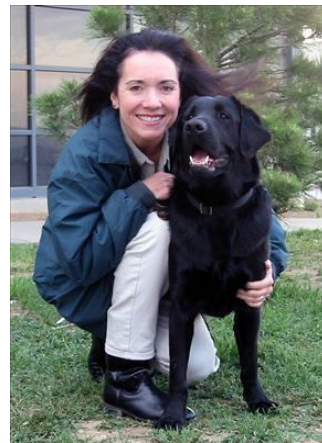
held, his new foster family was well aware of the importance of a solid foundation. He would need to be so reliable that his blind person would be able to experience the independence of a sighted person, living free from the apprehension of impending danger—quite a big responsibility for such a little pup. With this foster family he would learn about love, family, attachment, manners, and the world—the good and the scary. He would learn to ride buses, lie quietly under tables in restaurants, to ignore squirrels, manage loud noises, and trust his people—so many lessons.



Rigo learned these lessons well, and at fourteen months of age he made the trip back to the Guide Dogs for the Blind in California to begin his formal harness training. After acing his six months of harness training, he was matched with a gentleman who had been blind for many years and was receiving his fifth guide dog. Rigo succeeded in all other areas of his short life, but for some reason he just couldn't seem to conquer the task of relieving himself on

command (guide dogs are taught to “do their business” when told on a regular schedule to accommodate the blind person's accessibility and opportunity to take their dogs outside). Despite all the training and resources invested in Rigo, he didn't quite make the perfect grade required by Guide Dogs, and another guide dog was chosen to partner with the blind man. Guide Dogs decided that an alternative career would be the best choice for Rigo; an expensive decision, but a true testimony to the compassion and humaneness of the Guide Dogs for the Blind. Rigo was returned to his puppy raiser, and she was allowed to make the decision on a future in which Rigo's talents and training would be best utilized. Rigo was flown home from California to the woman who had lovingly raised him. After much soul searching, she decided to place him with her friend, Diana.

May 25, 2004 – My anticipation waiting for the flight to arrive was incredible. I'll never forget the first time I saw Rigo. He stepped out of his crate after a long flight as if he'd only been in there for awhile. He shook himself, looked around and upon seeing familiar faces of his puppy raiser and others, his face broke into a huge smile. He was gorgeous! Guide Dogs had groomed him perfectly – clean, shiny thick black coat, sparkling white teeth, nails trim.I could scarcely believe he was going to be mine. Ken took a picture of me and Rigo that evening at the airport. Rigo stood very close to me. He seemed to know that I was his new person. It felt like we belonged together.



At first Rigo wasn't sure what his role should be. “Diana must be blind,” he likely surmised as he dutifully showed her curbs and steps to make sure his new human remained safe and wasn't harmed by unforeseen obstacles. However, in short time he figured out that his role wasn't to be a guide for Diana. Regardless, he stuck by her side at all times and ignored all others (just as he was trained to do in guide school), only to find that Diana patiently invited him to visit with others. It was a difficult transition from service dog thinking to therapy dog thinking. A service dog is trained to serve only one, while a therapy dog works with many. With time, Rigo welcomed

his freedom to interact with others and began to settle into a comfortable partnership with Diana. But it wasn't until one autumn day that Rigo discovered his true work.

September 16, 2005 marks one of the most heart-wrenching and difficult days of my life. It was the day that my beloved Golden Retriever, Shana, took her last breath as she lay in my arms after losing a battle with cancer. We had been together for almost fifteen years. She was unwaveringly loyal, my faithful companion who also possessed amazing intuitiveness and natural ability to be a therapy dog – a career we shared over many years and thousands of precious souls in hospitals, hospice, schools and other settings until she retired at thirteen. When Shana passed away, part of me died as well and my passion for continuing to do animal-assisted therapy was almost extinguished by the depth of my sorrow. Through Shana, I discovered the human-animal bond. Through Rigo, I was enabled to continue.

In those weeks leading to Shana's death, as Rigo sensed my deep sorrow and pain and watched the outpouring of my grief when she passed, I believe that marked the moment for him that, in his own way, he took on the role of healer and protector of my heart.

From that moment forward the bond between Rigo and Diana deepened. Diana took Rigo everywhere with her. She needed him, and he now understood the importance of his role. He was no longer the guide dog who failed; he was now Diana's canine partner in life. His very presence provided incredible comfort to her, and he helped her to cope with the immensely painful loss of her beloved Shana.



Together they have become a human-animal team to emulate. Rigo's special training and extensive socialization make him the ideal therapy dog. Nothing fazes him, and this allows him to enjoy settings that would induce stress in other therapy dogs. Together they now work in a wide variety of settings including an in-patient rehab unit in a large hospital, a mental health center for children who have suffered trauma and abuse, and at numerous speaking engagements to provide public education on the human-animal bond. He

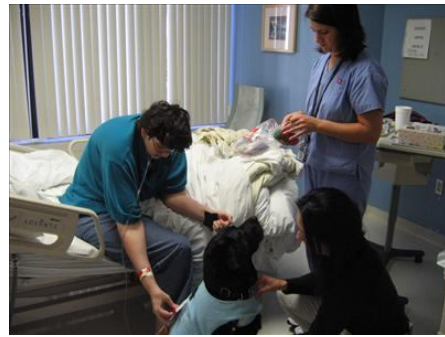


accompanies Diana as she teaches graduate school classes and conducts courses for healthcare professionals who wish to incorporate animal-assisted therapy into their own practices. In addition, Rigo is a demo dog for courses Diana teaches for those who wish to do therapy work with their pets. Lastly, Rigo is certified as a disaster relief dog with the Red Cross and is also a regular blood donor at a local animal emergency clinic.



On the day that I met Rigo and Diana, they had just finished assisting a therapist on the rehab unit at a large university hospital. Diana smiled as she told me how much she loves their Friday morning animal-assisted therapy sessions, for during these times they see the same patients on multiple occasions over two to three weeks. They get to witness the patients' progress and see the difference they are making in the patients' lives. During these sessions, she and Rigo

assist in the therapy for patients who are recovering from various ailments such as burns on up to ninety percent of their bodies, strokes, brain injuries, and brain tumors. Rigo seems to know instinctively how to interact with each patient. When he is asked to tug on a rope to provide the necessary resistance to develop the patient's muscles, Diana watches in amazement as Rigo seems to know just how much pressure to exert for each patient, providing greater resistance for patients with more strength and minimal resistance to those who are more fragile. As we talked, Diana pulled out a baby blue felt vest that Rigo wears as he helps other patients develop their muscle coordination and language sequencing skills. Rigo waits patiently while the patients' follow the therapist's directions to place various colored felt shapes, letters, and numbers onto his felt vest.



Diana told me several stories about their work with these patients. One such patient had suffered a stroke. There was a vacant look in her eyes, the kind of look that let Diana know that her brain was not processing information correctly. But Rigo made a connection with this woman. Although holding eye contact is not a natural behavior for a dog (it is considered to be rude and aggressive in canine culture), Rigo has the ability to gently hold his gaze with his kind, soft eyes, and it was precisely this skill that allowed Rigo to profoundly connect with this woman in a way that no human had been able to do since her injury. On another occasion, Diana and Rigo were working with a woman who was suffering from an inoperable brain tumor. While patients with these kinds of situations frequently can



not even remember their own children's name, this woman was able to remember Rigo's name each session. During their last session together, Diana gave the woman Rigo's business card so she could remember him. She lifted the card to her lips and gently kissed the card. She then said, "I love Rigo" as she was wheeled down the hallway to her room. That was the last time Diana ever saw that woman, but she knew she and Rigo had made a difference in her life.

Diana then told me about their work with burn patients. Outside of the hospital setting it would be highly unlikely that Diana would ever have had the opportunity to interact with someone in those circumstances. She spoke about the shame and embarrassment that these patients often feel due to their forever-changed appearance. They are incredibly self-conscious and normally don't want anyone to see their scarred faces, but they welcome a visit from Rigo. They know that Rigo sees past their scars and imperfections. Rigo unconditionally accepts them how they are. It is just the medicine they need to begin the healing.



Rigo and Diana also frequently visit in the school systems. They are ambassadors for the human-animal bond, and together they are the perfect team to educate children about respect for life, compassion, and what a well-trained dog is like. Many children in impoverished neighborhoods have never experienced the love and companionship that a dog can offer. Dogs with whom they have come in contact are often used for protection or are untrained. As a result, the children have not learned how to

appropriately and safely interact with a dog, and have never experienced the life-changing bond that comes from forming a friendship with a well-trained canine. These children often leave these educational settings and return home to tell excited stories to their parents about their visit with the wonderful therapy dog. Diana smiled as she told me of numerous personal letters and hand-drawn pictures the students have sent to her and Rigo in appreciation. These mementos hold a special place in her heart, for they speak to the lasting difference their work is making in people's lives each day.



The potential work settings are endless for Diana and Rigo. They regularly teach in various settings about therapy dog work and about the human-animal bond. Rigo serves as the consummate example of what every therapy dog can only hope to be someday. Although they have only been together as a team for a few years, you would never know by watching them work. They complement each other perfectly, providing opportunities for each other and touching lives in ways that would be impossible to achieve by themselves.

I am very humbled by Teri's story about the unique partnership that Rigo and I share. I am incredibly honored that Rigo and I have been chosen as Pet Partner team of the month. It is a gift of sorts, as Rigo's birthday is this month, on July 13th. He'll be seven and I'll have had the privilege to have him as my constant companion for the past five years. I will be forever grateful to Bonnie McPartland, Dot Dill and Guide Dogs for the Blind – without them, Rigo would not be in my life.

Rigo is a wise soul. His deep dark eyes melt hearts, calm fears and invite confidences. He is quiet, calm and gentle. He loves to swim, play fetch with his ball, spend time with his favorite people and dog

friends, and nothing puts a bigger smile on his face than when we're reunited after being apart. He touches many lives, but I dare say none as deep as mine. Rigo is a soul-mate to me and everyday with him is a gift. He enriches my life. He makes me feel like gold. His purity of character and sincerity of his everlasting devotion is remarkable. He takes ordinary moments and makes them miraculous. He is every bit a jewel; the only difference being that to me, he is priceless. Diana McQuarrie



ⁱ Pichot, Teri (2009). Transformation of the Heart. iUniverse, Inc., pp 123-132.