

## *Karla Holt with Sadie and Gabriel*



Karla and Sadie



Karla and Gabriel

I am so honored to be the DPP Team of the month! Visiting with my dogs has been a huge part of my life since 2011, and I appreciate all that DPP does to help facilitate that for all of us!

I had just lost my first Springer Spaniel Barkley in July 2010, and came across a picture on the English Springer Rescue site of a bonded pair of Springers, one brown and white (Sadie) and one black and white (Koda.) Their family had to leave them behind when they moved to South Africa following dad's work. My heartstrings "twanged" and I arranged to drive to Salt Lake City to adopt them.



Although both Sadie and Koda (Koda passed away in 2015) were eventually trained to be therapy dogs, I started with Sadie, because she was the oldest, and because the obedience work, agility and rally classes were a way for us to form a deep bond, and for her to become more self-confident. In the beginning, Sadie used Koda as her security blanket, and when he was not around, she was very anxious and timid. Sadie learned to trust me when going into novel situations and strange environments, and I learned to trust her insights about people and what they needed in the moment. She was a

**Master Dog Therapist!**

I am a licensed psychotherapist by training and profession, and so have a good grasp on assessing situations and "reading people." Sadie has me beat by a mile! When going into new places, she would transfer up the leash what she was feeling and observing, and she would often be aware of any anxiety/anxiousness myself or others were experiencing before I recognized it for what it was - she was very attuned to everything and everyone around her, and she shared that awareness with me. I am so grateful to her for her tutelage, and the lessons she taught me about being mindful and present in the moment, as only a dog can be.

I visited many locations and environments with Sadie, as she was a rock-solid partner. She was not fond of crowds or loud places, but seemed to prefer quieter, one-on-one interactions, and so was particularly suited for hospice work with Agape and other hospice organizations and doing the READ program at a local library in Westminster. I started visiting with Sadie in early 2011, after completing training with The Humane Society and evaluation through Pet Partners. We stayed active visiting independently with Pet Partners (then Delta Society), and another group up north that has since dissolved, before joining Denver Pet Partners in 2014.

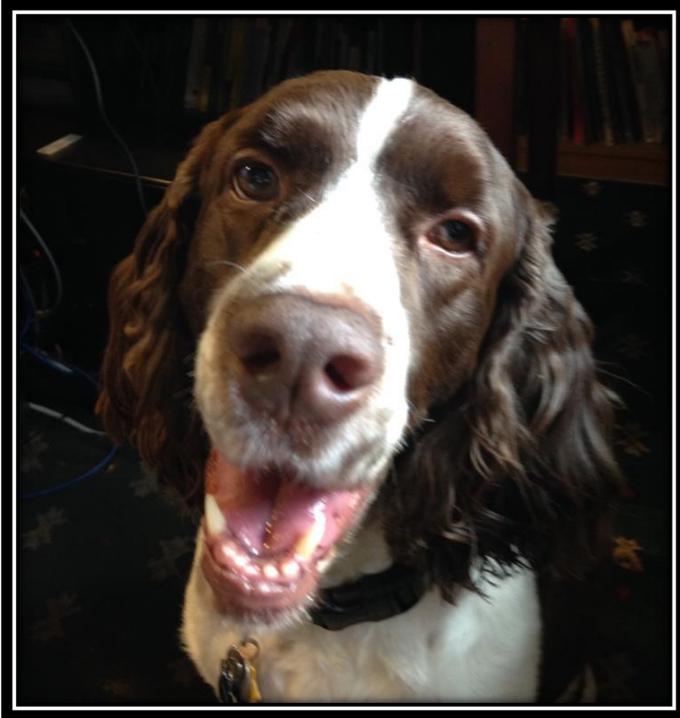


One visit with Sadie that stands out was a request that came through another hospice group, Denver Hospice. They had a young man in their care that had Springer Spaniels growing up, and wished for a visit with a brown and white Springer, like his dog had been.



This gentleman was in the final stages of a terminal illness, confined to his bed and very weak. Sadie and I entered his dim room, and the only sounds were of his labored breathing. I found a padded chair for Sadie to sit on, and I knelt by his bed and called his name. As his eyes opened, he saw Sadie, and he smiled, face lit from within. I helped him pet Sadie, and lay his hands gently on her head and body. I told him all about how Sadie had come into my life, and what a kind and gentle soul she was. As he stroked her, he was nodding that he heard and understood my words. When I could tell he was tiring, I told him how happy Sadie and I were that we had met him, and he smiled back and mouthed the words "thank you." He then closed his eyes and went to sleep, with a smile on his face. I heard from the hospice folks that he passed away later that day. Sadie helped him get his wish and let go, showing me once again of the power of what our Pet Partner visits can accomplish. I have tears in my eyes remembering Sadie's calm presence and this man's simple joy in petting her.

Sadie has recently retired, after 6+ years and countless visits to people from all walks of life and ages. She was a registered AKC Therapy Dog (100+ visits), and was a READ dog, participating in many literacy events over the years. At 14, I feel like she has earned her retirement from active visiting. She now enjoys mothering the foster dogs that stay with us, giving them tips on being a "good dog" and getting the maximum number of treats! It was a difficult decision to retire her, but one I am at peace with.



Gabriel joined our family in 2013, another ESRA alum, who was a “foster failure.” His goofy grin and happy-go-lucky spirit won me over quick, not to mention how well he bonded with Sadie & Koda, so I adopted him. He had a hard life prior to moving in with us, being picked up off the street and sheltered 3 times in the Arkansas system. Somewhere along the line, he became heartworm positive, and had to undergo that long and

difficult treatment (which no doubt contributed to his loathing of crates and cages!) I trained him to do therapy dog work, and he loved it.

Gabriel has a generous and giving spirit, and excels in making people laugh with his funny faces and playfulness. Gabe deals well with crowds and loud places, and has been my “go-to” for events and meet-and-greets. He particularly enjoys his time at the library with the kids, laying his head on laps and in books while kids read, bringing a smile to the children and parents alike. Gabriel also has a special knack working with veterans, and I visit with Gabe when I know that I will be going to see a veteran hospice patient, or visit the Veteran’s nursing home. Gabriel seems to easily bond with the vets, and encourages the men to recall memories of dogs in their past and happier times, with a few tears mixed in with the memory review.

Gabriel and I were visiting several hospice patients, and I was giving him a break out in the grassy courtyard, getting a drink, making a “pit stop” and rolling the treat ball for Gabe. I noticed an elderly man in a wheelchair, off on the side of the yard, all alone and turned away from the other residents. He was wearing a military hat and jacket with patches. I strategically tossed



the treat ball in that direction, and Gabe rolled it over to the man, who glanced down and looked at Gabriel a bit, before picking up the ball and tossing it off in the grass for Gabe to go get. I walked up and said hello, and we started a conversation. The first thing he shared with me was about his dog he had as a young man that looked like Gabriel, how he used to hunt with him, and how much joy that gave him. Gabriel kept coming back over for pets and strokes, and sat down right next to the gentleman, placing his head in his lap. The man proceeded to tell me more about other dogs he had, highlights of his military career and injuries that disabled him, and then he shared that his wife of 53 years had recently died. All this time, he is stroking Gabriel's head and ears, tears are rolling down his face (and mine) and Gabriel stays present with him, inviting the man to share his life review with us. What a privilege to be witness to this man's pain and hear his story, all facilitated by Gabriel. Again, the power of our Pet Partner's visits with people is astounding, humbling and awesome.

Unfortunately, in March of 2016, Gabriel blew out his left knee, requiring TPLO surgery. Almost 8 weeks to the day after his first surgery, he blew out his other knee, requiring a TPLO on that knee. He was rehabbed both times at CRCG, with hydrotherapy, acupuncture, etc., but Gabe developed a neurological condition like an essential tremor in humans and now he shakes on all four limbs. You can't tell if he is anxious, afraid, upset, etc. That same goofy smile is there, but it would make visiting and re-evaluating him difficult, so with a sad heart I made the decision to retire Gabriel from therapy dog work. He misses his visits, I know, as do I!

I have been blessed in having some remarkable therapy dogs to share my animal-assisted visits with over the years, and Sadie and Gabriel have been two of the best. I am keeping my eyes open for the next candidate to come into my life to train and partner with, and until that time, I will continue to volunteer with DPP in other roles, like helping with evaluations and events. Denver Pet Partners is a great organization, and I look forward to being a part of it for years to come! 😊

*DPP Team of the Month (November 2017)*

