

## *Joann Blasberg and Nesh*



I would like to introduce you to Nesh, my wonderful greyhound. Although we are the “team”, she is the star. Nesh, whose full name is Neshika, which means “kiss” in Hebrew, came to me via a greyhound rescue organization in March, 2015. At that time, I was looking for a full greyhound, having had a miniature greyhound that had passed away about a year before. I saw her picture and, I must admit, I was not impressed – she does not take good pictures. But, I decided to take a look at her at her foster home, just to start the process of finding the “right” dog. I was absolutely sure I was not going to like this white and brindle pup (she was just under 2 years old when I saw her). Of course, when the foster mom opened the door and this animal was smiling at me and showing such warmth, I fell in love! I was able to bring her home with me about 2 months later (travel and work plans prevented me from bringing her home sooner). And there starts our journey to DPP.

We went through normal adoption stages, with Nesh comfortable at home but not yet bonded. But since she was so sweet and gentle, the process advanced with love and joy. As I wanted her to be safe and to engage in the world with good manners, I started with a trainer for the basic safety and courtesy commands – sit, down, stay, heel, as well as no jumping or otherwise letting her exuberance overpower the object of her “desire”. She was a quick learner and I was enjoying her behaviors and willingness to engage with people. Most importantly, though, Nesh is a classic greyhound – couch potato that is happiest with human contact.



I was, at that time, trying to figure out how I could use my then new-found retirement and knew I wanted to volunteer. And then the lightbulb went on! Nesh was so calm and good with people, that I looked into animal assisted therapy and what would be needed for Nesh to volunteer. I found Denver Pet Partners and started the process. I learned very quickly that the key was the handler training and took the course. I was so nervous for our first evaluation (I visited the site just so she would not have to see it for the first time on the day of the test – I have since learned that the school was not amused!). Nerves and all, Nesh and I passed our evaluation! That was in October, 2016



OK, then we had to pick our volunteering jobs. I did not think that hospital visits would be a good fit for Nesh. Susan Horecki then suggested the animal assisted therapy group work at Thirdway, Lowry campus, a secure residential treatment facility for at-risk teens. I shadowed the then volunteer team and started with Lowry in November 2016. We have been there ever since. The “therapy” has morphed from group work to our visiting each house on the campus for the kids to see and pet Nesh, who is in heaven with all the attention. The kids get to talking – about their animals at home, what they miss and how much having Nesh to “love on” means to them.

For the second hour, we spend that time at one of the houses where the therapists think the interaction with Nesh would be best for the kids – we participate in that house’s “house meeting” where the kids check in with feelings and there is general discussion of their goals, struggles and needs. All the while, Nesh is there for the kids to pet and focus on when things get tough. And Nesh, while she is lazy (she immediately lies on the floor and the kids have to come to her!), she does perform a valuable therapy function. Nesh does react to the energy in the house – when the kids are stressed, Nesh exhibits stress – her body language and behavior give the kids clues – she cannot seem to “settle” or may “pant”, or may go to each kid for comfort or may simply sit on the other side of the space, away from everyone. The therapists are then able to point to Nesh to get the kids to see how to read body language, how their behavior may affect Nesh and by extension, the people around them. And they can see how to lessen Nesh’s stress – Nesh’s body language may tell them “leave me alone” for



now, or, “I am stressed”. But every time, Nesh is able to reach the kids and ultimately calm them and teach them or simply give them a little bit of respite from their struggles.



Nesh and I also volunteer at the Jeffco Youth Mental Health Court, administered by a wonderful magistrate and caring staff. There, Nesh is actually simply a calming influence on the courtroom. We first say hello to the staff during their status meeting before court starts – the staff needs the love and attention as well. When court is in session, the troubled kids are either in the courtroom or are brought in from

detention. Almost always, there are family members present as well. And Nesh does her stuff! The kids love to see and pet her – she may wander (on leash) into the benches to say hello to anyone who wants her attention. Sometimes, one of the kids wants Nesh at the podium while they talk to the magistrate. Sometimes, the detention kids, who must sit off to the side, need some attention and we go over to them, at which point, Nesh demands they pet her. But mostly, she does her “come to me” thing – lays down in the middle of the aisle between benches and “demands” that the people come to her. Very often, there are siblings who are bored in court and want to play with her. Or the parents and others need some comfort. Nesh obliges all.

What do I get out of Lowry and Jeffco? I get to see my beauty give love to the kids (and staff) who need it so. I get to see how these deeply troubled kids progress and actually improve through the incredible work of the caring staffs. I get to participate in the therapy sessions and watch as the kids use the programs and strive to get out of the system and learn how to live in the world. From my perspective, I could not have found a more fulfilling way to give back during my retirement.

Nesh and I have tried other volunteer spots – the Fletcher Miller School, criminal victim or witness intake, de-stress events and airport duty. Not all have been a good fit, either for Nesh or for me. I have learned what Nesh enjoys and where she thrives and where we can do the most good.

I have learned so much from Nesh as a handler and as a pet partner. Just as the kids learn from her “language”, I learn how she communicates and I listen. Denver Pet Partners opened me up to all of Nesh’s potential and, I think, made me a better partner for her – at home and at work. I



*DPP Team of the Month (April 2019)*



cannot imagine not being a part of the DPP family of teams. So, I thank DPP for all they have given to me, Nesh and the community.

