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Animal-Assisted Therapy Team of the Month – November 2011 Steve Cearley & Shanti



I am not sure when I learned about Pet Partners and the work that therapy animals do but it was before we lost our first dog, Akela, at 14 ½ years. Both she and Baloo were Keeshond mixes and neither was suited to therapy work so I knew the idea would have to wait until we got a new dog.

The day before Easter 2008, I met the dog that started our involvement in Animal-Assisted Therapy. Mowgli was a 10-week old Golden Retriever/Great Pyrenees mix that stole my heart from the first moment I saw him. He was in a cage at a PetSmart adoption event and, while all the other dogs were barking and being rowdy, he was sitting up quietly watching every move I made. At that moment I knew I had found my Therapy Dog. They called us on Easter Sunday, 2008 to tell us he was ours and so started our year of getting ready to be a therapy team!

By December 2008, Mowgli was almost 1 year old. As loving and gentle as he was, he still played too rough for 13 year old Baloo and her arthritic hips, so we thought we should find him a playmate more his size. December 15, 2008, set new record lows in Denver at -19 degrees and a high of only 2 degrees. Mowgli LOVED IT; in fact he loved it so much that we could not get him to come in the house! In frustration, we turned to the internet in search of information on “how cold is too cold” for Golden Retrievers and Great Pyrenees. I am not sure we found out for sure but I did land on the National Great Pyrenees Rescue web site and found Shanti. She was 3½ years old and living with at least her third family. She had been malnourished and abused but had a sweet face and was living in Denver. We

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made arrangements to foster her over the Christmas holiday but knew she would never leave the moment she and Mowgli met.

In the summer of 2009 I attend the Handler Training and tested with Mowgli at the next session. We were doing just fine until the Neutral Dog session when he just had to play with that other dog! That earned us a Not Ready. All in all, he did OK for a 16-month old pup. Boy, have we come a long way since both he

and Shanti now regularly assist at evaluations as the Neutral Dogs! We rescheduled for the next session and I decided that I would test with both Mowgli and Shanti. Even though I had been spending most of my time working with Mowgli, it was Shanti that surprised me. She walked thru the test with ease and ended up with a higher score than Mowgli. I am still registered to visit with both dogs but Shanti is my normal partner so that my wife Martha can visit with Mowgli.

In September 2009 we started visiting at Swedish Medical Center and still go most Saturday mornings. In addition, we have been helping out with Night Owls, Shots for Tots, the booth at the Plum Creek Dog Show, Buckley Family days, evaluations and other events.

It never ceases to amaze me how Shanti can touch the lives of the people we meet. The first comment I hear from most folks is "Wow, that is a BIG DOG" followed quickly by "She is so soft and pretty." We have so many stories that I would love to share from our visits – like the older woman who exclaimed as we were leaving her room "My but that was an ugly child" to the mom to be in Antepartum care who we visited each week for over a month. I will share only my two favorite stories. We were visiting in the ER one Saturday morning with a group that had been in a motorcycle accident. These were big tough guys, all in leather with beards and tattoos. We stopped in while the Doctor was working on one man's hand to help take his mind off his injuries. Shanti sat next to his bed and pushed her head up under his free



hand. He started petting her and broke out in tears. "Oh...I had a dog just like her when I was growing up. I loved her so much. It means so much to me to see her and have her here with me," he shared.

For the other story, you need a bit of background history. Shanti came to us having been abused and malnourished. One thing that she will never do is jump on a bed. We have invited her up, even tried to lift her up, and she always pulls away. We have come to believe that she must have been punished for



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getting on the bed in her past. On Saturday mornings, we always visit Pediatrics before we start our assigned rounds. On this morning we had two kids to visit; the first was a young girl of about 11. When we walked in to the room, Shanti's ears lifted, her head tilted and she made eye contact with the girl who sat up in bed with a squeal and a huge smile on her face. As we approached the bed to make our normal 270-degree turn and stand beside the bed to visit, Shanti leapt up on the bed, buried her head next to the girl and laid down next to her. I am not sure who was the most stunned – me, that she did something she had never done in the year we had her or her mom, who was standing on the far side of the bed watching a 95-pound dog leap on her daughter! The girl was delighted; she grabbed Shanti around the neck and buried her face in her fur. The two of them just lay there in that cuddle for over 20 minutes. I think they would have been happy that way all day if I had stayed. I can't even begin to understand the connection that Shanti established with her that caused her to act in such an unplanned and unexpected way but there was clearly a deep connection and need that was fulfilled. She has never done that again.

My life is changed every week by the people we meet. Old friends we have not seen in years and new ones we will never forget. The hospital staff, patients and visitors all touch our hearts and from their smiles and willingness to ignore the ever present trail of white fur left behind, we touch their hearts as well.

