



Diana Richett with Simon and Tiva



Diana and Simon



Diana and Tiva

April is Prevention of Animal Cruelty month as well as Child Abuse Prevention month. Simon, Tiva and I are deeply honored to be selected as the Denver Pet Partners team of the month especially during a month dedicated to the protection of both children and animals. I always have been passionate about these two causes. I went to law school so I could be an effective advocate for children. I was fortunate to start my legal career as a Denver Public Defender in the juvenile division representing children charged with crimes. Many of the children I represented were children of color who lived in poverty. A number were children from fractured families who gravitated toward gangs and had little hope of surviving past their 18th birthdays let alone graduating from high school. Some of these children's first contacts with the system were for abuse and neglect. After five years with the public defender system, I broadened my legal focus in private practice to serve as a guardian ad litem for dependent, neglected, abused as well as delinquent children.

I always have loved and found comfort in animals and after over fifteen years of practice took a break from law to become a certified veterinary technician. While I never worked in this area and returned to the practice of law, my medical knowledge made it possible for me to adopt and care for animals with special needs, including cats who were in renal failure, were diabetic, had cancer, chronic respiratory issues and radial hypoplasia or twisted front limbs. None of this, however, really prepared me for caring for my most complex and most beloved animal and pet partner, Simon.



Simon, who will be ten years old in June, has silken black fur and gorgeous green eyes. He maneuvers around the house by pulling himself with his front legs and dragging his lower body. Simon, you see, was born with severe spinal deformities; he has pectus excavatum or funnel chest which is a skeletal deformity of the chest characterized by a depressed sternum as well as kyphosis which is an abnormal curvature of the thoracic spine. Simon's hind legs also are paralyzed and are contorted to make them look like they are on backwards. Simon also is incontinent so I always have

had to express his bladder at least three times a day. At age four, he was diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, or an enlarged heart, which can result in congestive heart failure and ultimately death. A few years later, after repeated ultrasounds and specialized blood tests, his diagnosis was changed for the better to cor pulmonale or right-sided heart enlargement due to pulmonary problems. He also has asthma and requires a daily medication regime which includes two puffs of flovent from an inhaler.

Simon is a cat who by all accounts should not even be here but don't tell him or me that. He always displayed a will and spirit not only to survive but to go beyond his limitations and seemed destined to fulfill a valuable purpose in this world. Simon at a few weeks of age was found under a trash dumpster in Rifle, Colorado, by a young man who called the Friends of Rifle Shelter about the "crippled" kitten who appeared to have a broken back. Possibly thinking that the "kindest" thing to do for the kitten was to "put him out of his misery", he asked Melody, the volunteer, "What do you want me to do with him? Do you want me to stomp on him?" Of course, Melody told him "no" and directed him to bring the kitten to the shelter. Simon then was rushed to the veterinarian hospital where the vet, who could have easily chosen to euthanize him, decided to give him a chance. He was fostered by the clinic's vet tech until he was ready to be adopted.

I had lost my beloved pit bull Quincy a few months earlier and decided to check out the Pets with Disabilities website hoping to adopt a disabled dog. It was there that I saw Simon and learned he was in a shelter in Colorado on the western slope. In August of 2002, I was chosen to adopt Simon and brought him home. Little did I know at the time just how special this kitten was and what an important part of my life he would become.

Denver Pet Partners – Team of the Month (April 2012)

DENVER PET PARTNERS



It was in December of 2008 that I adopted my other pet partner---my special girl Tiva. I was looking for a companion for my pit bull Jack who I had acquired in December of 2005. Jack, a purebred pit bull, was born with partial paralysis of his hind legs. Before he could be euthanized by his breeder, a vet tech stepped in and rescued Jack. She, however, lived in Aurora which shortly thereafter passed the barbaric and discriminatory breed specific ban against pit bulls. On top of that she learned she was going to be deployed to Iraq in December of 2005 and had to find new homes for her family of dogs. I saw her desperate plea for Jack, who was only seven months old, on petfinders.com and after my experience with Quincy decided to adopt another pit bull. Jack initially used a wheelchair to get around but after months in physical therapy he soon was able to walk and run albeit wobbly and had no need for the wheelchair. It was not his physical limitations, however, but his behavior that proved most challenging to me. He was unruly and very anxious around other dogs yet I thought he really needed canine companionship as well. I thought a younger female possibly with a disability who would at least let him think he was the boss would be a good companion for Jack.



In November 2008, I was looking on the dogs in danger website which not only lists the dogs in shelters across the United States who desperately need homes but also the number of days before they are euthanized. I just happened to look at the dogs in the state of New Mexico and there I saw a shepherd mix puppy named Neela who was at the Gallup-McKinley County Humane Society in Pine Hill, New Mexico. Her profile described her as a "tiny pup born with only three legs; missing left front leg from birth; sweet and loving; gets around fine." But it also said that she had days left before she would be euthanized. I decided to go with my heart and see if the shelter would consider an out-of-state adoption and if she could be flown in to Colorado. When I spoke to Sena at the shelter she told me that Neela was safe in a foster home and yes I could adopt her and yes they would be happy to fly her to me as they had done this a few times for a "few lucky pets and knew the routine." I later learned that Neela was born on an Indian reservation and that Gallup had a huge stray population. Many of the dogs roam in packs killing livestock and biting people. On the Navajo reservation, many people are too poor to even get their dogs to a veterinarian let alone pay to have them spayed or neutered. The Nation euthanizes thousands of dogs a year. "Dogs are referred to as feces eaters, and children are taught to never cry for or bury a dog."

After she came to live with me in December 2008, Neela was renamed "Tiva" which is an Indian name meaning "dance." While it took a month before Jack wanted anything to do with her, Tiva was persistent in trying to get him to play with her. One day they just started

Denver Pet Partners – Team of the Month (April 2012)

DENVER PET PARTNERS



playing together and have been friends ever since although Tiva the Diva quickly made it clear to Jack that she's top dog.

I enrolled Tiva in obedience classes and she was quick to pick up "sit, stay, leave it, down" and other commands. She was such a sweet, friendly dog that I wondered about having her work with children in a program that would encourage them to become better readers.

As a child I knew intuitively that animals were a source of comfort, healing and hope. Later, I saw how children, particularly those who are unable to trust, are more at ease with animals and more likely to risk a relationship with them because animals will not judge them, tattle on them or betray their confidences. At the time I adopted Simon I was a volunteer at an animal shelter and participated in its humane education program which teaches children kindness and respect for all living creatures. Simon, who was so good natured and friendly, soon went with me to schools, residential treatment centers and Lookout Mountain Youth Services Center, an institution for juvenile offenders. While the children would initially react to the "crippled" kitty with sighs of sadness, Simon who knew how to work a room soon had them smiling and asking if they could pet him which he welcomed. He clearly taught them more about kindness and compassion than I ever could.

After viewing the website and the many opportunities with animal-assisted therapy through Denver Pet Partners which at that time had joined with the American Humane Association, I decided to take the course in June 2009. That summer Simon, Tiva and I passed the evaluations and we became registered therapy teams. We decided to participate in the University of Denver's Bridge Project at the Westwood site. The Bridge Project is an after-school program that provides educational opportunities to children living in Denver's public housing projects. A culturally diverse program, the Bridge Project's mission is to help children graduate from high school and have the resources to earn a college degree, gain vocational training or succeed in obtaining employment.



Simon and I have tutored Clara since September of 2009 while Tiva and I have worked with Aadrian since the Fall of 2010. We help them with their homework, read stories and also play a game towards the end of the session. Both girls love animals and have shared stories about their own animals and experiences with animals. Clara and Aadrian look forward to seeing Simon and Tiva each week. They are the link in the relationship I have built with each of the girls. Tiva and Simon also have an impact on other children at Bridge who see them each week. A number of the children will ask to pet them and then talk about their own animals. Some will ask what happened to Tiva's leg and this is a lesson on how her missing leg does not stop her from getting around or enjoying life. There is one little boy at Bridge who I learned does not talk at all in the program although I understand he does talk at home. One day he was seated at a table next to the table I shared with Simon and Clara. Phuong, the program director, asked him if he wanted to pet Simon. Without saying a word, he shook his head "no" and continued drawing his picture. When we

Denver Pet Partners – Team of the Month (April 2012)

DENVER PET PARTNERS



looked over, he was drawing a picture of a cat. A couple months ago, we saw him again and he followed his little friend over to where Simon and I were waiting for Clara. The little girl explained that he did not talk and knew sign language and she then asked if she could pet my cat. He also proceeded to pet Simon and was smiling the whole time. One of the staff commented on how nice it was to see that interaction.

Simon and I also have started volunteering at Nights Lights at the Waterstone Community Church in Littleton. Night Lights, like Night Owls, is an evening respite program for parents who have children with mental and physical challenges. The children are paired with a buddy who takes his or her child to various activities during the evening, one of which is our animal-assisted therapy program. I always marvel at how calm Simon is with the children some of whom have challenges just like him. Some of the physically challenged children are assisted in petting him with their hands or even their feet and let us know through smiles and giggles that stroking Simon's fur gives them pleasure.

Simon and I also were honored last year when Simon's story, "Simon, My Cat with Special Needs, Gives Hope to Children" was chosen to be included in the book Animals and the Kids Who Love Them, Extraordinary True Stories of Hope, Healing and Compassion by Allen and Linda Anderson which came out in November 2011. This book is a collection of stories that celebrates and affirms the loving relationship between children and animals.

I am so glad I, along with Simon and Tiva, are a part of the Denver Pet Partner Program. I love belonging to such a valuable program where I not only get to work with my animals and people who love animals but also through my animals enrich the lives of children.

Denver Pet Partners – Team of the Month (April 2012)

