

## *Fable's Story*



I have always loved animals, especially dogs. When I could finally have my own dog I wanted something small, smart, which required overall low maintenance.. My love of the flat-faced breeds brought me first to a litter of Pugs, but I was appalled at how much the parents shed, so I kept looking. Next I looked at the Boston Terrier and it has been my favorite breed for the past twenty years. They possess all the qualities I was looking for as well as being absolutely adorable!

My first Boston was a female which received her CDX in obedience and trained in UKC

agility. I had become very involved in training and showing in obedience as well as agility. Currently I have two male Bostons, a Greyhound and Steele's Fabled Legend, CD, CGC, NA, NAJ... my Fable.

I have had a strong interest in the dog-human bond, and all dogs that assist people. Thinking that I had neither time nor talent for training guides and service dogs, my goal became having a therapy dog when I was retired. An American Kennel Club (AKC) Gazette article about therapy dogs mentioned the Delta Society. My curiosity led me to Denver Pet Partners and a Pet Partners TEAM Training workshop being held in six weeks. Fable was already obedience trained, I wasn't retired since I work full time as an RN at Saint Joseph's Hospital, but the calling was so great I just had to register for that workshop. A week after the workshop, Fable and I were evaluated, we passed and soon began visiting at the Medical Center of Aurora North on the third floor of the Gero Psych unit. I felt it was all just meant to be since everything just fell into place. I am so grateful that I didn't wait until I was retired since I would have missed all these wonderful years of therapy work with Fable.

As a nurse wanting to give patients more through an activity enjoyable to both my dog and me, I knew we would be brightening the lives of others, I knew the Boston would be a perfect therapy dog breed. The Boston Terriers are dogs from the past and many elderly people recognize them from their own childhoods. The Boston was the most popular dog breed in the country from the early 1900s until the 1930s. During the time I've owned this breed, almost everyone I run into has had a Boston as a child, their neighbor had one, or a relative raised Bostons. The breed brings back many happy memories. The patients we visit are frequently lost into their own minds, yet sometimes seeing and touching a dog from their past will trigger brief happy memories. Although I am not sure why Bostons are not popular right now, most people do recognize them and they certainly bring a smile to most people they meet.

Fable, my Boston Terrier was born November 22, 1999; I have had her since she was eight weeks old. She and I are very bonded, have always had a very special relationship and are connected in a special way that I knew would help us be a special therapy team. We seem to know what the other is thinking and to communicate without using words. Fable is very friendly, likes people, but is calm and quiet. As a nurse I have a flexible schedule, so Fable and I usually visit on Tuesdays. Since she is so small, the third floor where we visit is perfect because she works



while on a chair. We are part of a group therapy conducted by Joanne the Recreational Therapist. Everyone sits around in a circle, Joanne asks everyone to introduce themselves, then look at Fable, tell how they think she is feeling and why, then tell how they are feeling. After everyone in the circle has had a turn, I talk about Fable, answer questions, we talk some more, then I take Fable in her chair to visit with every person, one on one. Many times Joanne will have patients talk about how different Fable is from other dogs since Fable has no tail and almost no nose. I have observed that many people who would not talk to a person directly will



look at Fable and answer questions. I also find it interesting that usually the way people perceive Fable is feeling, is actually the way they are feeling. Patients that will not interact in other ways will usually smile and interact with Fable. Some people will not respond verbally nor will they open their eyes, but when I put their hand on Fable's head and she softly licks their hand, they will smile, and their hand will pat her head or touch her ears. It is also very clear Fable was inwardly touching them as they were outwardly touching her.

Once in a while there are patients who don't come to the group so we will go to their rooms to visit. Fable will sit on the bed or I will hold her so they can see and pet her. Once time we were to visiting called to Fable, "Oh, come here, I need some of your energy". She stated that she had no energy at all and had been too tired to leave her room. Fable sat on the bed with her, they snuggled while we talked and I swear I could see Fable's energy fading and the woman's energy increasing. When we left the woman was happier, smiling, and saying that Fable was better than any medicine she could have ever been given. I noticed that all week after that visit Fable seemed much more quiet and tired than usual.

Another time a very hard of hearing lady who was usually in the group, was very lethargic and not able to participate, so Fable and I went to her room. Joanne and I tried to wake her, loudly calling her name repeatedly, but her eyes still didn't open. Fable was sitting on a chair next to the bed, waiting to visit. As I turned to ask Joanne if we should leave, Fable stood on the arm of the chair, reached over with her little front foot, touched the lady's hand, gave a gentle lick and that woman came alive! She turned her head, opened her eyes, petted Fable all over, spoke and she smiled ear to ear. I turned to Joanne and said, "I guess that's how you communicate without words."

Fable seems to love her therapy work. On Tuesdays she knows it's our day to visit and she is very excited that morning. When I get her bag and vest she starts orbiting and running around the house, she is so excited!



We have been working the Gero Psych unit for two years and she knows the routine. She leads me to the elevator, then waits impatiently for the staff to buzz us into the locked ward. She heads straight to the nurses' station for her treat, and certainly knows which nurse feeds her the best. We then head into the day room and she jumps into a chair for the group session.

Sometimes we are in unpredictable environments and have had a few close calls when a patient is so confused that they grab too hard, hit instead of petting, or hugging too hard. That is where our bond and silent communication come into play, for Fable has total trust that I will keep her safe. I can read her body language very well, can see if she is uncomfortable in time to move on before there is a problem. Joanne is wonderful about alerting us to patients who are unpredictable and keeps us away from trouble.



Since Fable is a small dog it doesn't take much to injure her so I always work very close to her, ready to move in if something unexpected happens. Fable seems to know that she is working and bringing joy to people. She also loves the attention and has a bit of a princess attitude. She offers a front paw like a little princess, always gets a big smile and an, "Ahh, how cute!" I bring Goldfish crackers on our visits for the

patients to feed her. In actuality, she does not like them and will NOT take them from me BUT will eat one if offered by a patient! That tells me she knows she is working and what is expected of her. I think she knows if she didn't take the cracker a patient's feelings would be hurt.



For fun, Fable loves to do agility. She is very fast, very good, but we really don't do very well at trials because her handler (me) is a klutz. But we both have a lot of fun since Fable has a natural talent for agility. She has two titles and one leg to go for a third. I hope to compete in Rally Obedience with her next year as well.

I am so grateful that I found Delta Society and especially Denver Pet Partners. I am very proud to be part of this organization. I hope to continue to do therapy work on the third floor with Fable for many more years.

*Editor's Comments: One of the keys to doing successful therapy work with the psychiatric patient population is to realize that their perception is their reality and to try to meet them where they're at. It's a challenging, often difficult environment to work in and requires very special skills from an animal-assisted therapy team. Debby and Fable are to be commended for their ongoing dedication to the patients on third floor at Medical Center of Aurora North over the past two years. Fable has clearly endeared herself to patients and*

*staff alike and performs small miracles every week by doing something that most people never can - unconditionally accepting people for who they are and being fully in the moment when with them. Kudos to you Debby, for molding, shaping and loving little Fable into such an extraordinary therapy dog and empowering her to change lives every week. DPP is proud to have you both on the team and as our Pet Partners Team of the Month.*

*Diana McQuarrie*