

A Story of Joy and Grace



Lily and her dam, Nati, were the first Bernese Mountain Dogs I'd ever met. I was immediately smitten with the dam, Nati, who went belly-up for attention in the veterinary cardiology clinic where I was working. The puppy, cute beyond words, had a heart murmur indicating severe sub aortic stenosis. Her grim prognosis was sudden death by age two.

Lily's breeder, obviously devastated at this news, feared that euthanasia might be the best option for the doomed puppy. I worked up the courage to ask if the puppy could be placed with me. We both knew my daily access to the cardiologist was a good choice. This stranger's trust in me became an unexpected and profound turning point in my life with animals.

Over the following two months, Lily had as happy a life as a puppy with heart disease could have. The whole clinic seemed to adopt her as she came to work with me daily, and everyone there spoiled her as much as I did at home. I have fond memories of her delighting my family who came to visit that Christmas... we laughed as she licked my apparently delicious brother-in-law from head to toe. I remember her enthusiasm at discovering the snow pile we built for her on the deck of a mountain cabin, since she couldn't manage the stairs to the snowy ground. I'll never forget Lily's Don King hairdo - she had the most pronounced head of puppy fuzz any Berner baby has ever displayed.

After Christmas, Lily's health declined with more heart failure. She had a second heart defect that was not apparent earlier. We pulled out all the stops and treated her aggressively with human cardiac medications, but I stopped short of a surgery since there was a low likelihood of saving her. She was euthanized at the clinic at four months of age, on my lap, surrounded by the cardiologist and clinic staff who loved her, too.



Lily's story is very sad, but her short life was just the beginning of remarkable positivity in mine. Because of her, so many wonderful things have come into my life.... great friends, terrific dogs, and meaningful service to others. Lily showed me her breed's tremendous capacity to delight and soothe human beings. These skills are too precious to hoard, they are just begging to be shared with as many people as possible. I began researching therapy dog volunteer work as I waited for another Bernese Mountain Dog to come into my life.

Oh-be-"Joy"ful



I had to wait a full year after losing Lily for another Nati puppy to arrive. She is Summit's Oh-be-Joyful, hence Joy. Joy's puppy hood was filled with happily greeting clients at the vet clinic, keeping play dates with friend's puppies, exhibiting at dog shows, learning to swim, and generally spreading joy wherever she went.

Joy earned her American Kennel Club Championship one month short of her second birthday. During Joy's next time in the show ring, which was her first as a special (she was already a champion), she won Best of Breed competing with some top-ranked Bernese Mountain Dogs which were tough Colorado competition. Joy's calling as show girl and potential breeder was cut short a year later when she became ill with life-threatening pyometra (an infection of the uterus).

While on a visit to her breeder's home in rural Nebraska, Joy' spiked a fever signaling the serious infection. Local veterinarians performed an emergency spay, removing Joy's nine-pound, infection-filled uterus. The small clinic was not equipped for overnight hospitalizations, so Joy's breeder and I nursed her round the clock; even the breeder's kids helped, offering up a music stand to hold IV drips and a bedroom to function as a private hospital room. Twice Joy crashed in the middle of the night necessitating trips on make-shift stretchers to the clinic for emergency vet care. At one point her white blood cell count fell to zero (zero!), necessitating harrowing blood transfusions from both Joy's half-sister and dam. What the rural clinic lacked in big city technology, their staff made up easily with personal attention, complete with daily house calls so Joy could rest comfortably during blood draws and antibiotic injections. Several times that week, we knew Joy was silently barking to angels as we tried to talk her back to us.



I took Joy's survival to mean that she was meant to have a special destiny. One month later an amazingly recuperated Joy passed her CGC test and then her Denver Pet Partners' evaluation, receiving Delta Society therapy dog certification on February 1, 2004. As a dog who has perfected the art of relaxation by spending more time lounging belly up than in any other pursuit, she seemed a natural for the Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.) program. We were the first to sign up for Denver Pet Partners' first R.E.A.D. library, coming on board in April 2004. Joy is now famous at Bemis Library for rolling belly up and putting her nose in the book being read to her. Joy continues to participate in Bemis Library's *Paws to Read* monthly program.

In summer of 2004, Joy and I began weekly visits to The Bridge Program at Columbine, where we continue to work with two children in one session. These visits have been tremendously

rewarding. One of the girls, Maria, has developed an extra special bond with Joy. She has collected three stuffed Bernese Mountain Dogs which she has named Teen Joy, Little Joy, and Mini Joy. All three accompany her to reading visits with THE REAL Joy. Maria honored us recently when she asked if I could be her regular mentor and if Joy could still be her reading mentor. (The Bridge Program is an after-school program for inner-city youth which has wonderful mentoring and tutoring programs). We were further honored when Maria presented us with a rose at Bridge's school-year-end celebration. When she showed us her fourth-grade graduation certificate listing among her year's accomplishments a 1.5 grade level improvement in reading! Joy and I smiled all the way home that day, hoping we'd contributed to Maria's success.



Joy has even done a bit of therapy dog moonlighting during our travels. Recently, Joy was asked to visit a friend's out-of-state special education classroom during story time. Joy sought out one boy to cozy up to, Jason, a frail, blind boy. Jason reciprocated by stroking Joy all over, even gently feeling her face as Joy nudged his hand encouraging him to continue. The special education staff can rarely get Jason to speak, so they were thrilled when Jason spoke up and smiled widely as he proclaimed Dog! Dog!.

On Christmas Day 2004, Joy joined the pet therapy teams at Swedish Medical Center. She alternates with her newly Delta Society certified housemate, Grace, to make our weekly rounds through the Ambulatory Care Unit, the Multiple Trauma Unit, and the Surgery and Critical Care Waiting Rooms. Both Joy and Grace particularly like finding children in the waiting rooms who are in need of a distraction. Both dogs will hold still for endless hugs before pursuing pets from every adult in the room too. (Given the chance, the dogs will also sweep the floors clear of snack crumbs dropped by the kids!). Both Joy and Grace make it a special point to stop in the lobby and gift shop to greet the hospital volunteers at those posts.

Grace



In retrospect, Joy spoiled me. When Summit's Climb Ev'ry Mountain's puppy, Grace, joined our household in 2001, Grace was a Berner who challenged me throughout her puppy hood. Her breeder still teases me about the number of times I called threatening to FedEx Grace back. Grace proved to be smarter than your average Berner, often creatively entertaining herself with projects such as carrying the entire Denver Yellow Pages book out through the dog door and shredding and distributing it beneath two hundred feet of hedges. She developed a particular dislike of Martha Stewart's magazines (sent to me by an ever-hopeful Mother concerned about my housekeeping skills). Grace seems to think this particular magazines are made for especially entertaining shredding. Redecorating indoors by hauling a glass vase of roses down a flight of stairs, spilling all the way,

as well as re-wiring my air conditioner seemed all in a dog-day's work to Grace.

Grace did not take a liking, however, to dog showing. As a big, strong, beautiful Berner girl, she has accumulated almost enough points to become a champion, but Grace finds trotting around in a circle like a beauty queen quite boring. Wishing to find more brainy but appropriate activities for Grace, I sought the help of a wonderful trainer. Fortunately, Grace loved the trainer's fun approach to real work including obedience training enabling Grace to become a Canine Good Citizen and a therapy dog. And as with Joy, dog showing did give Grace a good foundation of indoor manners and calm socializing with new people in busy environments.

Grace has come a long way from being a mischievous puppy, through temperament-calming motherhood in Spring 2004, to certification as a Denver Pet Partners/Delta Society therapy dog in January 2005. Of course, I do still have to explain to those we visit that I did not envision a 110 pound Bernese Mountain Horse when I named this girl Grace, but Grace's sheer pleasure at meeting people soon wins over even the most wary visitor.

Grace visits at Swedish Medical Center and participates in the R.E.A.D. program, *Bark for Books*, at Douglas County Libraries. Predictably, Grace is a more active listener than Joy, turning pages with her big paws or offering a bark at appropriate points in stories. Also predictably, Grace's favorite book to hear is *Dogzilla*.

Beyond Joy and Grace



Two other Bernese Mountain Dogs have come to "grace" our "joy"ful household. Two year-old Liesl (left) is well on the way to her champion title, with one-year-old Beckon (right) not far behind. I hope both will follow in Joy and Grace's paw prints, becoming Denver Pet Partners and fulfilling the goal of my joyful Bernese Mountain Dogs - to make a positive

difference in the lives of others.

"May your heart - and your dogs - always be joyful"

- CH Summit's Oh-be-joyful CGC (Joy) (Princess JoyJoy) (Chockalocka JoyJoy)
- Summit's Climb Ev'ry Mountain CGC (Grace) (Graceroo) (Gee)
- Summit's Fur Elise (Liesl) (Liesl Pizzl) (Liesl Pizzl Delivery) (Geez Louiesl)
- Summit's You Must Love Me (Beckon) (Beckon Boo) (Baby Boo)(Boo)(Bootiful)

More pictures of Joy and Grace and their relatives can be viewed at www.SummitBMD.homestead.com. Be sure to click on Snow Storm to see fun pictures of onsite reporters Princess Joy Joy and Graceroo covering the Blizzard of 2003.



Editors Note: *With a heart as big as her wonderful smile, Sharon Keefer is an absolute delight to know and work with. In her short time with Denver Pet Partners, she has displayed exemplary dedication to our team and consistent commitment to our clients. She has certified not only one, but both of her dogs and dedicated her beloved Berners to making a difference in people's lives, especially those of precious children. Despite Sharon's busy life, she makes time to visit regularly at several facilities and does an outstanding job in her role as Team Lead at our Bemis Library program. Joy and Grace are true to their names, imparting happiness and goodwill to whoever they encounter. They are charming dogs who clearly revel in their duties as a therapy dog and seem notably harmonious in their partnership with Sharon. Sharon, thank you for all you do. For your selfless contributions to our team and your positive impact on the field of animal-assisted therapy, Denver Pet Partners is honored to name you Pet Partner Team of the Month.*

Diana McQuarrie