

Karen and Joakie's Story



Before Joakie, my now 110 pound 7 year old lovable golden retriever, was a year old he visited a family friend who was dying. It was crazy how my gentle pup seemed to just naturally know what to do to comfort and care for the man, quietly sitting close to the bed while the man's hand rested on Joakie's furry head. With that one interaction, we knew that something special was going on and it was suggested that I look into a program where Joakie could volunteer. I loved the thought of it as it gave me an intentional reason to spend more time with my buddy.

Fast forward a few years and Joakie, who is now a registered therapy dog through the American Humane Association, and I have been

regular volunteers at the Barth Hotel Assisted Living Residence, a senior living community in downtown Denver that provides support and assistance to seniors and older adults with disabilities. If you ever wondered how a dog makes friends - just ask the folks at the Barth.

Joakie is not only well known at the Barth, he's a welcome guest at the place. Once a week we go over to make the rounds in the lobby, searching out snuggles, pets and treats from the residents. Folks are generally waiting for us on arrival and you'd think it was Joakie's hotel the way he saunters in each week ready to see his friends and check on how they're doing. He is attributed to helping one resident find his "way back" to engaging in community and thriving (some might say that my pup saved a life), Joakie is one of the few creatures who has the ability to draw a smile from a near deaf and near blind resident, he has participated in Halloween parties and Christmas photo shoots as the primary focal point in many a picture with his friends, and last summer the residents went so far as to throw him a special birthday party.



Joakie was given his own piece of cake and had a few other pieces, as well. It's no wonder he loves to visit!



For me, being Joakie's partner through these and other visits has been both pure joy and humbling. The joy part is easy to understand as the interactions with residents are generally filled with laughter, cooing and lots of petting. The humbling parts are those unexpected moments when the dog is drawn to stay a little longer, sit a little closer or nuzzle himself under an arm that wasn't quite sure about how to hug the pup. That's usually when you see eyes water up, a sad face turn to a smile, or little soft words get whispered to Joakie that the rest of either can't hear or understand – but are surely understood by the one telling and the dog who is listening. It's in those moments that you realize that there is a language that we can't fully understand that happens with dogs and those who interact with them.

Volunteering with Joakie has been a highlight of my relationship with him, my deeply loved dog. It's our chance to do something that feels good to both of us and never seems to get tiring.

Thanks to American Humane for providing such a terrific program where the volunteering feels more like "getting" than giving.

