

*Karen Stalman with P.J. and Malachi*



*Karen and P.J.*



*Karen and Malachi*

Pet therapy work is an honor. It is an honor to touch the lives of others, and pet therapy has certainly changed mine. It is thrilling, heart-warming and occasionally heart-breaking. Before I began working with therapy dogs, I was successful in many different kinds of dog competitions. I also gained valuable experience in canine search and rescue. All of that pales in comparison to the privilege of loving people with the dogs! We get to witness and assist in the first steps of a stroke patient, or ease the pain of someone who is in intensive care, or let medical staff exhale for a few moments with a warm furry face.



German Shepherds have been in my life for 20 plus years. P.J. (my third therapy dog), is a German Shepherd mix and came to me after I lost two black German shepherds in a row to hip dysplasia, both before the age of 2! I had also recently lost a pup to parvo. Veterinarians told me that I couldn't have another pup at my home for at least 2 years. Yeah, right. After thoroughly disinfecting and sanitizing the property both inside and out, and waiting a certain amount of time, P.J. came and never got so much as a sniffle. "Praise Jesus," I said and the name P.J. stuck. She is a rescue from my neighborhood and has been a very special dog! She has a happy drive with an



enormous desire to please. Being smaller and lighter on her feet she can do many of the exercises with the stroke/brain injury people at Easter Seals Day program. One example is one of balance, helpful for a person to learn to shift their weight from leg to leg which can sometimes be a precursor to walking. The person stands facing P.J. and tries to swing his leg directly out to the side. P.J. will lift her leg on the same side. As the person gets stronger and builds up some endurance, he can shift his weight and do the same thing with the opposite leg. P.J. imitates them. In time they are going back and forth quickly thus “dancing” with P.J. Everyone smiles. At the end when we all cheer the person who worked so very hard, we clap our hands and P.J. leaps straight up in the air! P.J.’s willing and joyful demeanor give people incentives to brush her with an arm that maybe wasn’t working properly the day before. Her instant response to commands challenges the person to speak, enunciating correctly so that P.J. will do what she’s been told. When working with a dog, everyone succeeds, no one fails. This is what it’s all about!



In the intensive care units at hospitals, some cubicles cannot be entered because the patient is in isolation. However, patients watch the dogs moving around the unit as we work in a “herd” at the hospital. To include those patients who are watching, P.J. has been taught to wave at the door. One patient who was very severely injured could only move the one finger attached to a pulse-ox monitor. She moved that one finger, however, so that she could wave back at P.J! P.J. has been taught to give a very soft kiss where I touch a patient. Those who want to interact but are unable to do so get a kiss and usually a huge smile follows.



Malachi is my fourth therapy dog. He came to me in part as a gift. His older half-brother, Gideon, is mostly retired from therapy work. Malachi is an oversized German shepherd. He forgot to read that section of his papers and he is easily 20 pounds and 4 inches too big! Being very laid back he is a gentle giant. If not for proactive handling, he would lick one entire side of someone’s face in one fell swoop! At 107 pounds, he likes to sit on my lap! One day I received a call from Claudette who wanted me to visit her aunt Mary for a surprise on her 90<sup>th</sup> plus birthday. Claudette flew up from Texas and we set up the plan. She entered the room first announcing her surprise birthday present. Mary cannot see straight in front of

herself very well, but her peripheral vision is okay. As we approached she caught sight of Malachi. Mary rolled back in her recliner, clapped her hands high in the air exclaiming “Oh! Oh!”



Claudette was in tears because the surprise was successful. Mary proceeded to lean over Malachi, running her hands down his back and down the length of his tail. Then she ran her hands up his ears, down his chest, and down the length of his sides. It was if because of her limited vision she was drinking him in! When I learned that Mary had raised Weimaraners at one time and thus was an experienced dog person, I allowed her to give Malachi some pieces of biscuits. They really bonded as you can see in the photos. I have adopted Mary and visit her often. She lives in Thornton and would LOVE some more dog visits. Claudette was so impressed with her first experience with therapy dogs that she adopted a dog upon her return to Texas. She will go through the training and start visiting people.

We were all invited to speak at an elementary school and hopefully we inspired a new generation of therapy dog handlers!

I love being part of a group of like-minded people in Denver Pet Partners. It will be so great if I get to work with other dogs and handlers because I learn from everyone and every dog that I meet. Thank you, Diana, for teaching and encouraging me over the years. You are a treasure to me.

