

Linda Nielsen and CJ



For the first nine weeks of his life, CJ (the Court Jester) was known as "Caboose". A very appropriate name for a pup who had made such a surprise entry into this world. I had called his breeder weeks before his birth only to be told that, yes indeed, she was expecting a litter of puppies, but an ultrasound had revealed that there would be seven puppies and that, unfortunately, all of the puppies had been promised. I could be put on a waiting list.

Weeks later I had a call from the breeder who told me the story of his unexpected arrival. Mama Shania had had an uneventful whelping with seven puppies easily delivered. Three hours later as all the puppies were successfully nursing, Shania suddenly stood up,

shaking off her nursing brood, and it became evident that she was about to deliver another puppy. Expecting a stillborn or runt, the breeder was surprised to see a big healthy boy who gave a big yawn to announce his arrival. "Caboose" turned out to be the biggest puppy of the litter and it was the last time he was last in line for anything...especially food.

I did not get CJ because he was the 8th puppy. When his breeder found out that I was looking for a puppy to be trained as a therapy dog, she told me that, after extensive testing at 6 weeks of age, she had determined that there were three puppies best suited for therapy work. As CJ's father and grandfather had also been therapy dogs, the breeder was very pleased to think that another puppy would follow in their footsteps. She gave me a privilege not afforded to the prospective owners of the other puppies. I was to be allowed to choose from the three puppies. Being a believer in karma and the universe, I decided that the puppy would choose me. Seated on the floor in a room with the three sleeping puppies, I waited. After some minutes, Caboose raised his head, walked across the room, climbed into my lap, and promptly fell asleep again. 3 weeks later I took him to his forever home and we began our life together.

CJ is a Portuguese Water Dog that loves the water, but is uninterested in swimming. Like his ancestors before him who



herded fish into nets and sheep in the rocky interior of Portugal, he has the qualities of other better-known herding dogs. Most notably the intense eye contact which can be unnerving when he wants something. This quality led to one of our most memorable experiences which I will relate below.

When CJ was 15 months old, we passed our first evaluation and began our work as a therapy team. (My very big thanks to my mentor, Patty Standley, and her dog Samson who worked with us on the dreaded "neutral dog" exercise just minutes before entering the evaluation room). Our very first visit was at Shots for Tots and I remember how excited I was giving him a bath and how nervous I was entering a facility on our own for the very first time.

As a former teacher, I was especially interested in working with children. This led us to Fletcher Miller School where we volunteered for three years. The children at Fletcher Miller have multiple disabilities and I realized from the outset that it would require a great deal of creativity and preparation to engage all of the children assembled in the room. Although many of the children enjoyed hearing simple stories, it was activities which offered either visual or tactile stimulation which proved to be the most successful. As many of the children are non-verbal, I worked with the teachers to develop non-verbal means by which they could communicate with me and CJ. Some loved to use hand signals to make CJ go through his obedience skills of "sit", "down", and "up" when the child wanted him to put his paws on the tray of the wheelchair. Others enjoyed simply walking him through the halls at their side or next to their wheelchair. One teacher



recorded CJ's bark and the children would push a button to hear his bark whenever a dog appeared in one of the stories that I might be reading. In the winter we would go outside and give the children snow to make snowballs which they then would throw for CJ to catch. A favorite game was "Hiding CJ's bone" when CJ and I and one child would leave the room and then return to find where the other students had hidden CJ's large stuffed bone. I bought animal masks for the children which enabled them to role play different animals in some of the story books. One of the best days was when we had a birthday party for CJ. All of the children wore dog hats and each child tried to pretend to be a dog in the best manner possible...crawling, woofing, growling....it was hysterical.



Our most memorable experience at Fletcher Miller came in the third year of working with an autistic child. In the first year this child distanced himself from CJ by putting a large table between us. In the second year he moved to the front of the table, but would avert both his eyes and his body if CJ approached. During the third year, although his eyes were still averted, he began to reach out his hand to touch CJ as he passed by. One day for no explicable reason CJ

entered the room and sat down in front of the boy. To the amazement of both the teacher and me, we realized that the child and CJ were both staring at one another with that fixed determination which characterized my dog, but certainly not this child. This "stare-down" continued for what seemed a very long time, but was probably not more than 30 seconds. Suddenly without warning, CJ gave one very loud woof which startled the child and made him jump. In the next instant before either the teacher or I could react, the child slid to the floor and put his arms around CJ and put forward his face for a lick. I do not know nor will I ever know what transpired during those seconds of "eye-lock". I do know that after this day that child would be among the first to greet us by sliding from his chair to the floor where he waited for his new buddy. It is for days like this that we all at DPP continue our service from which we receive even more than we endeavor to give.

In addition to our work at Fletcher Miller, CJ and I have also volunteered at Swedish and in the Paws to Read program at Bemis Library. Along with more than 25 other DPP members, I completed the R.E.A.D. workshop held at Swedish hospital in February. By taking the workshop, I realized that again I was being drawn into working more closely with children. When the opportunity presented itself to become an Instructor for the R.E.A.D. program, I decided that it was something that I wanted to pursue. In June I will be attending a R.E.A.D. Instructor Training workshop in Indianapolis. In the future I hope to be working closely with Diana, the DPP board, and other DPP members to expand the R.E.A.D. program in the Denver area.

