

## *Pam Soderholm and Split*



Split is a very special 7-year-old Golden retriever. Split wears “two hats” in that he is my Service Dog first, and when he is off duty he enjoys visiting as a Pet Partner. We live in Colorado Springs and have been members of Denver Pet Partners since April 2008.

Split has been very specially trained to help mitigate my disability. I have rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus so depending on the activity of my diseases it can be a challenge to function each day. Split is my best pal, but he also assists me with a number of tasks that improves the quality of my life one-hundred-fold. For example, it can be

difficult for me to pick up items that I drop. Split will happily retrieve anything that I drop and bring it right to me, placing the item in my lap. When I am walking and not using my power wheelchair, Split helps me balance so that I don't fall. He also helps me balance and brace when I am going up and down stairs. He braces me as I get up or down from a chair or transfer from one place to another. There are times when it is difficult or painful for me to get undressed and Split assists me by tugging off a jacket or my shoes. This is one of his favorite tasks as it is just a big game of “tug” to him! One of the most important skills Split has is the ability to retrieve my portable phone from anywhere in my two-story townhome in case of a medical emergency. Without Split, my life would be much more difficult.

Split and I were partnered in March 2009, when my previous Service Dog, Audie, was suddenly diagnosed with hemangiosarcoma, and died only six weeks after his diagnosis. Audie was also a Pet Partner. Losing Audie to cancer was a very devastating experience for me, especially at his young age, and it was hard for me to even imagine working with another dog, whether as a service dog or as a therapy dog. His loss hit me extremely hard. But I also knew that even if I didn't feel like it at the time, I needed to “fake it” for a while until my emotions could catch up. I needed to have a service dog to help me function each day, so I really couldn't wait until I felt OK about getting a successor service dog. As much as I love Split, it was hard for me at first. I can remember feeling “guilty” about working with Split - that somehow I was being unfaithful to Audie's memory. Grief is a very individual thing, and there are many stages that we bounce around in until we can finally reach a place of peace. A lot easier to talk about than to get through. But we do get through it by being willing to experience the emotions and not try to stuff them away or try to ignore them. When I still felt such raw grief about losing Audie I constantly reminded myself that Split was an individual just as we all are. Audie and I were kind of like a little old couple that knew what the other one was going to do before they did. I had to remind myself that that didn't happen overnight - it took lots of time and Split and I would need time to achieve that same kind of relationship. Plus, it was important for

me to remember that it would be very unfair to Split for me to expect of him what it took years to achieve with my other partners. I'm happy to report that Split and I are now like that little old couple, and all the hard work we both put into it has been well worth it. Split has a very different personality than Audie did, but I love him just as much and celebrate the differences.



Through the years, Split and I have visited at a few different facilities. Currently, we are visiting two Goodwill programs in Colorado Springs. One is a day care facility for Alzheimer's and dementia clients, and the other program is a day care program for developmentally disabled adults. Split absolutely loves visiting the people in these programs and they love him. When he enters the rooms he is immediately surrounded by lots of people anxious to receive the love he has to give.

In the past, Split has also been part of the Paws To Read program through the Pikes Peak Library District. Even though we are not currently visiting at any of the libraries, Split LOVED his kids at the library and he never tired of listening to a story or looking at the pictures in a book. He developed quite the following of kids during his years spent in that program.



Split has touched many lives besides mine by loving unconditionally everyone he meets. In typical Golden retriever fashion, he is a real "moosh" and loves to be petted and loved on.

One of the things I always have to be aware of is the fact that Split's main job is as my service dog. When he is on duty in that capacity he cannot interact with other people as that could put me in danger. So in order to help him not become confused with his two jobs, I generally don't have him wear a cape for our pet therapy visits. This is because he wears a special harness with a balancing handle when he is working as my service dog. By not wearing a cape for our pet therapy visits, he knows that he is off duty and that it's OK to visit with people.

Split truly is an extraordinary dog and I am grateful to be partnered with him and honored to share him with the people we visit.

