

Phoebe's Story



After a long career with United Airlines, I retired in the aftermath of 9/11. Volunteering has always been a part of my life. When we lived in Illinois, I spearheaded a group that established our community Senior Citizens' Center. We arranged the purchase of the building, organized community support and financing, started a Meals on Wheels lunch program, and a senior transportation network as well as organizing the volunteers. The organization has been flourishing for many years now, and I am proud to have been a part of it.

So when retirement came for me after our move to Denver, I needed a new volunteer activity. I read about the Delta Society on the internet, and found the Denver Pet Partners

website.

Denver Pet Partners does so much good for so many people that I decided that this was an organization that would be a good fit for me. But what to do for a four-legged pet partner? It takes a very special dog for this type of work. Our Chow was too old, and our puppy was too young. My grown daughter, Carolyn, offered the perfect solution. Her dog, Phoebe, was to be my team mate. What a perfect choice. She is my "granddoggie," as well as my team partner.



Phoebe is a three year old, five pound, chocolate Chihuahua. Her tail wags from the shoulder like a whirlwind around every person she meets. She brings more joy with her greeting than her weight in chocolate candy would. And everybody loves chocolate! All I have to do is say, "let's go visit", and she is wagging and ready to go. Everyone usually says, "She is soooo cute!" "Is she full grown or just a puppy?" She is so small that the extra-small Delta vest covered her from head to toe. There wasn't much left to pet but the vest, so an exception was made that she could visit with just her Delta tag instead. It's more fun to pet a soft, warm dog than a green vest.



Her household is a bit unusual in that she lives with two big hunting dogs and four exotic birds, as well as our daughter. Two of the birds are bigger than she is. Guess who is the "boss?" Of course, Phoebe, who thinks she is a Great Dane! If one of the macaws leaves a perch for the floor, Phoebe will run up to it, put a paw on it and hold it down until Carolyn comes to put it back up on the perch. One of the birds does an imitation of Phoebe's bark that fools us all. She goes to

work with Carolyn every day except visiting days for Denver Pet Partners, so she is quite the social gal.

We have been visiting for just a year now at Littleton Life Care Center. Her tail starts wagging the minute we get to the desk to sign in. Greeting staff and visitors takes awhile before we can even get down to work. "Oh, what a cute little doggie," never dog, is the usual comment. And then, "Can I pet her?" always follows. Her tail is wagging so fast by then that she stirs up a breeze. It's the same story on the way out. It's interesting to notice that people's voices always go up higher when they talk to Phoebe. Maybe it's because she is so little.



One client rolled his wheelchair right up to us in the hall, and started talking about the book, "The Hound of Baskervilles," by Arthur Conan Doyle, because she is such a little dog. Then he went on to tell us all about his cats. He held her, and stroked her, and talked on and on. As we left him, one of the nurses said that was amazing, as he had not communicated with anyone since he had been there. She touched his heart.



She doesn't show favorites, just wags at everyone. But once in awhile, she sneaks a little nap while a client holds her and strokes her back. Treats are always a good thing, and she takes them like the little lady she is.

"I have dreamed about Phoebe all week," said another client. They all know Phoebe's name, but I don't think that they remember mine. That's just fine with me.

The nursing staff usually takes a break to get a bit of loving from Phoebe. She gives them a moment of joy in their busy days.

Recently we substituted at Shots for Tots, and Phoebe was in her element. She adored the children, and of course, they loved her too. I'm sure that she thought that the kids came just to see her. We hope to be doing more of that.

Phoebe is a fine example of human-animal bonding, and Denver Pet Partners has been a wonderful way to let her express her joy!



Bonus: Andy's Story



P.S. The puppy that was too young in Phoebe's story has finally matured and passed the Denver Pet Partner's Therapy Dog evaluation on August. 5th! He is now ready to go to work. His name is Andy, and this is his story.

Our daughter, Carolyn and I have always enjoyed visiting puppies together. She wanted to look at one, so we did. This little, white, fluffy Bichon, looked up from his playmates, made eye contact with me, and came running to me like I was his long lost momma! I picked him up, hugged him and played with him, and put him down. Our adult son was living with us at the time, and had a huge Samoyed, and a big Golden Retriever. We had a very old Akita Chow mix. Three big dogs in one house was more

than one vacuum could handle! I was in love with that pup, but reason prevailed. I didn't need another dog. A week later, she wanted to look one more time, so we did. The same puppy did the same thing, made eye contact with me and came running. I picked him up, played with him, and put him down again. As I started out the door, Carolyn picked him up, handed him to me, and said, "He is yours if you want him, Mom." I broke into tears before I could say no. So Andy came home with me, and has been not only my constant companion, but also the pathway to meeting so many new friends. Two years later our son recovered and moved out with his dogs, our Akita passed away at age fourteen, so we have just my friend Andy now.

We went to training classes together. We took basic and advanced obedience. Then agility, which was fun, but I'm too old to run that fast. Andy loved it though. I met a friend at my swimming classes who is a professional Bichon groomer, as well as breeder who shows her Bichons. She invited me to join the Rocky Mountain Bichon Frieze Club. There was another whole group of friends! They offered a Bichon grooming classes, which I was thrilled to do. There were more friends. Bichons

don't shed, but they are a nightmare to keep looking like a powder puff. I appreciate that I can do it myself.

I hadn't been to a dog show with Andy, so when the club invited us to a Fun Match they sponsored, I jumped at the chance. This one happened to be on a rainy Saturday. We went, thinking they would cancel, but they didn't. It was quite a sight to see fluffy, white, very wet, Bichons competing in the rain. In spite of the fact that Andy was reluctant to sit in the wet grass, he did take a first in Obedience. We had fun and met more new friends that day.

Phoebe and I had been visiting as a team at Littleton Life Care, but I knew that Andy had some exuberance issues that wouldn't be good in a therapy situation. He jumped at other dogs, just like he did our big dogs. He walked on his hind legs to get up to their level. The Bichon people call it the "Bichon Bounce." That would never do, and I didn't know how to stop him. He also had some social issues that I didn't know how to resolve. As much as I loved him, I had just about given up on him ever being a therapy dog.



One day I was reviewing the DPP website, and saw that Jo Mann was teaching a six-week therapy dog training class at the Parker Recreation Center, starting that night. Oh, my goodness, this was what we needed! I called, enrolled over the phone, and went to class two hours later. I've never enjoyed classes of any kind more in my life. There were eight teams in the class. More friends here!

It was such a pleasure to watch well trained dogs learn new skills. Through Jo's skillful coaching, I learned what to do to help my little buddy learn what he needed to be doing. He not only learned what he needed to know in class, but also passed the AKC Canine Good Citizen test in July.

It's always fun to work with Phoebe, and it will be a pleasure to share Andy with all the new friends we visit. They will take turns going to visit and events.

There is an old Girl Scout song that goes:

*Make new friends,
But keep the old.
One is silver,
And the other's gold.*

This applies to dogs as well as people, and especially to the bonds between the species. The unconditional love of dogs towards humans never ceases to amaze and comfort me. I see it comfort others as well when we visit. That is what makes volunteering all worthwhile!

