

## *Sharon Peters and Jasper*



He was insecure, wary and perpetually worried. It wouldn't be an overstatement to describe him as an emotional wreck.

A mid-size mutt of indeterminate lineage who'd clearly had a rough go of it during his first 18 months of life, he was a rescue, my rescue, trying to settle into a new life. But it was slow going. He wanted to love people, that much was obvious, but any time he'd approach someone—me or anyone else—he'd crouch and urinate. Loud voices sent him slinking into a corner where he'd curl into himself and watch with anxious eyes.

I despaired of his ever becoming something approaching a normal pet. But a trainer worked with me so I could work with him, and over the course of many, many weeks, this high-energy creature, now called Jasper, shook off the veneer of fear that had formed, layer upon layer, atop his sensitive, loving spirit.

One morning—and there was nothing subtle or tentative about this—he woke up convinced every person was his friend, worthy of trust, deserving of his time.

And with that, he set about making a name for himself in our neighborhood. An uncommonly gentle sort, intuitive beyond all measure, he earned the reputation of being able to soothe even the most dog-fearful child into relaxed acceptance of canines. And he could always seem to tell when a friend or neighbor was having a rough day, and would press in close. Jasper knew exactly what he was and what he was supposed to do. I was a little slower to figure it out. My moment of illumination finally occurred when he was about 4, and we were visiting friends in Montana. Jasper and I strolled into a cook-out party where 20 or so people were milling about, and my dog instantly fixated on a 60-something man we'd never met who was sitting in the distance with a cluster of pals. Jasper left my side, crossed the yard, slid in next to the man, and there he stayed for the rest of the evening, snuggled in tightly. Turns out the man, a Vietnam vet, was ill, had been undergoing radiation and chemo for quite some time. He thanked me repeatedly for the comfort my dog was giving him.



*Jasper, Sharon says, “has soft gentle eyes that can somehow see past the patient’s illness and fear and give them comfort and strength, the patients tell me. He has a broad, democratic notion of love that makes every person feel special, they say. I’ve learned a lot from this*

On that night I knew the path was clear. It was time to accept that having a dog of this sort carries an obligation to share. And so when I eventually had the opportunity to go through the certification process with Denver Pet Partners, I did.

In the years since then, Jasper has proven himself to be a generous and determined joy spreader whose empathy is boundless and whose instincts are perfect.

During the many months that we visited weekly at the memory loss center in Colorado Springs, the staff there often commented that Jasper seemed able to draw out the most closed-in people, first getting them to make eye contact, and then, often, compelling them to speak

to him. Sometimes, when a resident’s mind seemed to drift off, Jasper would nudge gently, and the person would refocus and resume telling stories of younger years.

It has been at the cancer treatment center, however, that Jasper has come into full bloom. He strolls confidently into the waiting room every Thursday morning, tail and butt in full happy swing, eyes scanning the waiting room. “It’s Jasper!” someone will shout, and folks start calling to him. He makes his own choices about whom to visit first, me tagging along at the end of the leash, and he works his way around the room, never skipping anyone, even those who arrived after he began his rounds, spending a little more time with one person or another on weeks when he thinks that person needs it.

When we enter the chemo infusion area, he stops for a moment, seemingly assessing greatest need. He lets me know whom we’ll visit first—and it’s almost always, the nurses tell me later, the person who is having a tough time of it.

One day last year, we approached a couple who’d been regulars at the center for several weeks. The woman was getting chemo for breast cancer, and she was always accompanied by her husband, a retired physician. On this day, oddly, Jasper glanced at the woman briefly and then made his way to her husband, placed his head on



*His empathy extends to animals as well as people. He has helped heal more than a dozen foster dogs, most of them in rocky shape, physically and emotionally, and readied them for a new life. Blonde foster Noelle had been on the run in Teller County for months, and when she was captured and taken to the shelter, she paced so constantly her feet bled. Timid and people fearful, she was with Jasper and Sharon for just five months, and was then adopted, confident and loving, to a Florissant woman.*

the man's thigh, and settled in against him. The wife, connected to the chemo lines, reached out and tapped me on the leg. "My husband is having a very hard time today," she whispered. "I hope you can let Jasper stay with him as long as possible. Don't worry about me today." Jasper sat at that man's knee for nearly half an hour, then gave him a soft look and moved onto the wife, and then, eventually, to the others in the room.



*Jasper is a solid therapy dog, a fine hiking buddy, and an excellent traveler who enjoys road trips.*

Jasper has some favorite people at the center, of course, people who know the precise spots where he loves to be rubbed. People who will grin at him when he shoots them that certain look, and nod their permission for him to flop onto his back for a belly rub. People who haul out their phones and show him new photos of their own dogs (which he always gazes at with respect, although I'm certain he has no idea what's there). But even though I know and Jasper knows and the people themselves know they're favorites, some weeks he spends little time with those people. Others in the room, he thinks, in the mysterious ways that dogs know these things, need him more.

Happily, many of the people who go through months of chemo are eventually released, cancer-free, and they no longer have to spend their Thursdays at the center. Some of them pop in months later just to say hi to their four-legged pal. He always seems to recognize them and acts as though there is no person in the world he would rather have seen at that moment.

And then, aware, I think, of his mission, he moves toward other outstretched hands, doing what he does.

*Sharon and Jasper live in Colorado Springs. She is the author of "Trusting Calvin," a recently released book about a Holocaust survivor and the service dogs that have enhanced his life.*