

## Sierra's Story



In the beginning I never would have guessed Sierra could become a therapy dog. When I met this naughty, but oh so cute puppy, I couldn't envision the great years that we would have together volunteering with Denver Pet Partners at the Medical Center of Aurora North. As she started to grow out of puppy-hood, I began to realize that her calm/gentle nature could be an asset as a therapy dog. (Of course, being her mom I am a little biased.) I started to look into where Sierra could be a therapy dog and found the Delta Society and Denver Pet Partners.

Even though no one at the hospital believes it, because she is so mellow, when I pull out her green

vest at home, she goes crazy. She turns circle after circle in front of the front door...and just in case I have parked in the back of my home, she runs to circle at the back door, as well.



We have been visiting at the Medical Center of Aurora North for 5 years now. One of the main reasons I wanted to visit there is that my grandmother had Alzheimer's and many patients there are struggling with Alzheimer's, so this hits close to home, so to speak. I enjoy doing anything I can to help make these patients' days a little brighter.

Secondly, I feel that the patients at Aurora North are an underserved group, as the Senior Care Center at the hospital isn't the easiest to get volunteer teams to visit. (I would encourage you to try it!) Finally, and probably most importantly, Sierra just really loves the elderly and has a very special and gentle way with them. Sierra is a gentle giant.



After all the years of volunteering there only a few people know my name, but everyone on the wing knows Sierra's name! Before and after the session with the patients she always gets treats from the nurses at the nurse's station. She sits and waits patiently pre and post visit for her treat...

Sierra has been able to break through to so many people. Many times patients who will not talk to anyone on the medical team will talk to Sierra or will tell me about their dogs growing up. Sierra also intuitively knows when (and when not!) a patient wants the chance to pet her.... Sierra ability to read the patients' body language is one of our greatest tools.

Through the course of our visits Sierra has broken her tail and has had ACL surgery. One thing that I had to learn after her medical events was that I needed to listen to both her and myself, as to when we offer the most as a team. We have had



to take some time off from volunteering, as I've realized that sometimes dogs (and humans) need to take a break in order to provide the most optimal experience for the patients.

Sierra has shown me that she prefers our small group setting, where she can visit each person one at a time and also do a little performance of her tricks (this is one the patients' favorite parts of the group). Even though it would be fun to visit a room full of children, that would not be the best environment for Sierra. I have learned from this experience that it is important in any partnership not to force your partner to do what you want.

So many times patients we are visiting ask if they can take Sierra home...and I have to let them know that she is just there to visit, but that we plan to visit again next week. It has been a great joy and privilege for both Sierra and I to visit with the people at the Medical Center of Aurora North.

