

## *Sunny's Story*



Because of Sunny, I have enjoyed many first-time experiences in my life; many of which have been exhilarating, inspiring, insightful, and just plain fun. But I get ahead of myself. My life has had wonderful experiences with other Samoyeds in my life which have led up to Sunny.

I have owned Samoyeds all my life. In 1972, my family was transferred from New Jersey to Colorado for my father's work. We went from living in a 3-bedroom apartment to a 3-bedroom house on a  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre lot! Well, with all that room and 2 young children, my parents researched various dog breeds to find one they felt would be trustworthy and great

with kids. My father wanted a breed that was intelligent and my mother wanted a breed that was beautiful. After considering several breeds, they decided on a Samoyed, which they purchased from wonderful breeders, Pearl and Wilson Clark. My very first Samoyed, Snowball, entered my life. She was everything that my parents could have hoped for in a pet. For me, a child who loved her stuffed animals, and scoffed at Barbie dolls, she was an absolute dream come true. Snowball was the sweetest girl, and became a huge part of my formative years. She gave me confidence, a sense of pride and a significant sense of responsibility.

I was a college sophomore at CSU in Fort Collins when we lost Snowball. My family and I had been fortunate to enjoy 13 wonderful years together with her. When I came home on weekends to visit my family there was an emptiness without her. I missed her smile and the way she instantly alleviated my stress as I trudged through a very intense educational program in Computer Science. She was for me, my first therapy dog. She possessed the qualities that we revere in a therapy dog. I begged my parents to allow me to get another dog, even though we all knew they would initially have to be the primary caretakers until I finished college. I think they knew how much having a dog meant to me and how much I needed that caring spirit in my life.

They gave me their consent and my journey to find my next Samoyed, also led me to the person who I now regard as a sister, Katherine Metter of Denkas Samoyeds.

Kathi and I instantly made a connection augmented by our shared Greek heritage. Our bond is very strong. (Just watch the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and you'll understand!) Kathi had been breeding Samoyeds for many years producing several AKC Champions. My earliest recollection about Kathi's breeding philosophy was her emphasis on temperament, that her dogs were family pets first, and then show dogs! Through Kathi, I acquired my next four Samoyeds over a span of 13 years: Collins (Ch Denkas Sir Collins), Yukon (Denkas Alaskan Yukon), Chanel (Ch Denkas En Vogure), and last but not least, Sunny (Ch Denkas Simply Sunsational WS).

Sunny's father, Zoomee (Ch Risuko's Joi of Snowonder) was a lovely, even-tempered, gorgeous male. In addition to being an AKC Champion with multiple Best of Breed and Group placements,

he was a registered therapy dog through the Therapy Dogs International organization. His



temperament was perfect for therapy work. He was especially tolerant of children, loving it when Kathi's daughter, and my goddaughters, Whitney and Taylor, visited. I was always amazed how comfortable he was as they played leapfrog over him while he stretched out on the floor. So, I should have known right then that his pups would be destined to do well in therapy work.

Sunny entered the world on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999. He was the only male in the litter of six. He truly was the most beautiful Samoyed puppy I have ever owned. He

looked like a little teddy bear. I was in love!

My journey of first-time experiences began when Sunny was six-months old. Several were in the conformation dog show area. Sunny was the first show dog I've owned that earned points at his first three dogs shows while only six-months old; won at a Samoyed Specialty, won Winner's Dog at the Heart of America Specialty in Topeka, Kansas; and won a 5-point major at the National Western complex in Denver, Colorado, triumphing over 23 competitors. Finally, he my youngest dog ever to finish his AKC championship at 17-months of age with three major wins. It was an amazing ride.

Fortunately, the journey continued into new activities I had never tried with my other Sammys. I belong to the national breed club called the Samoyed Club of America (SCA). SCA encourages its members to work with their dogs in many ways since Samoyeds are capable of providing physical service in venues not recognized by AKC. This enables dogs and owners to know the joy and honor of working together, and allows the public to witness and appreciate the value of dogs at work. In



addition, to breeding a quality dog in terms of its conformation, SCA encourages that Samoyeds be bred for soundness and attitude which enables them to be workers. SCA motivates its members by offering Working Samoyed (WS) titles to dogs which have demonstrated ability in one or more of the following areas: sledding, carting, skijoring, weight pulling, pack hiking, herding and THERAPY!!

Because of this program and Sunny's natural abilities, my first-time experiences continued. Sunny has demonstrated a knack for herding sheep! Also, he and I now share a major passion for pack hiking together. He carries his own pack and has amazing stamina hiking for miles and up tall mountain peaks as well. We hike with many other Sammy's and their owners. Typically five to eight Samoyeds and their owners take part in our hiking adventures. It's a blast, not only for the companionship in the Rocky Mountain wonderland we fortunately live in, but also to see these animals enjoy life as much we do! We tend to be quite a sight on the hike trail. It's hard not to notice these white, fluffy, smiling dogs!



Of course, out of all these activities, the therapy work Sunny and I perform is by far the most meaningful to each of our spirits. I knew Sunny had the temperament and a true love for children. His eyes would light up when he saw a child. This was evident at an early age when my goddaughters would spend the night at my home. Sadly, one of my goddaughters had undergone several major heart surgeries at a very young age. When she visited with her twin sister, I had to



be especially watchful that my dogs did not jump up on her, as she could not afford any kind of blow to the chest. Although she lived in house full of Samoyeds, and was pretty agile at protecting herself, I had to exercise caution when she was around my own dogs...or so I thought. Sunny, immediately sensed that with her, he just needed to lay down next to her, lick her hand, and let his energetic enthusiasm manifest into only some extreme tail wagging! I remember Kathi remarking, "It's like he knows". Well, that was yet another of my wonderful first experiences with Sunny. I was motivated to formalizing his ability by becoming a registered therapy dog team.

Luckily, through my local Samoyed club, Denver Samoyed Association, I was able to find more about becoming therapy dog team, through a fellow member and my good friend, Jane Reller. She was already a member of Delta Society. She and her Samoyed, Sydney, were very active in doing therapy work at her neighborhood nursing home. They were a real inspiration for me and still are! Jane helped me find the Denver Pet Partners (DPP) workshop which I participated in June 2004. Being a rather methodically minded person myself, I enjoyed the structure of the workshop and valued and benefited from the experienced instructor, Diana McQuarrie, and the knowledgeable guest speakers. Of course, having another Samoyed at our workshop, Sugar, owned by Stanley Yellott, made me feel right at home! I have known of Stanley for many years because of my work with Denver Samoyed Rescue. Stan has been a wonderful supporter of our rescue efforts, so I felt it was serendipitous that he was an active member of DPP and participated in Sunny's evaluation! When it was time for Sunny and me to be evaluated I was, of course, a little nervous. However, much of that nervousness was put aside as we waited our turn as was Malika, the miniature horse! Even before I walked into my evaluation, I had benefited from Malika's presences. Of course, Sunny was awestruck with Malika. He just couldn't believe his eyes! Passing the evaluation with Sunny was yet another great first-experience.

Since that time, Sunny and I have participated in multiple Shots for Tots clinics. The most memorable occasion was when one particular young girl came to the clinic for her immunizations. She was old enough to know what was about to happen, and was quite anxious about it. Her eyes would tear up, and her lip would quiver, but when she would pet and hug Sunny, she would calm down a bit. Her emotions seem to swing back and forth, but through it all Sunny just kept licking her hand and reassuring her. It was for precisely that reason that we were present at the clinic, to help relieve some of that stress, and take the edge off a pretty scary situation for a child. I couldn't have been more proud of Sunny that day!



Sunny and I then received our R.E.A.D. (Reading Education Assistance Dog) team certificate and, through the wonderful motivation and coordination talents of Donna Reif Sack and Randi Bolton, we now visit Highlands Ranch Library once a month. Again, Sunny and kids are just the perfect blend. At our first session, I wasn't sure if Sunny was going to be a little too rambunctious when he first met the child, but once again he surprised me. He was incredibly calm throughout it all. He laid down between the child and me, and as each child read, they would continually stroke Sunny's arms, and he would reciprocate with soft kisses on their hands. I saw just how comforting that was to both the child and Sunny too. I recall a 7-year old girl that seemed content to just want to talk about dogs during her allotted session. I finally said to her that



Sunny couldn't wait to hear another story, hoping that might help her switch gears to reading. She said to me, "I don't



read very well". I was a bit stunned by the bluntness of her statement, but I quickly responded with "Sunny doesn't mind, he just wants to hear the sound of your sweet voice." So, she picked up an easier book, and slowly started to read. I was sad to see her struggle through some of the easier words. I could see when she became more stressed trying to sound out certain words; she began petting Sunny's neck and body more intensely, almost as if to draw strength from him. She finished the entire book. I was so proud of her. I was also inspired by Sunny. His kindness gave her courage she needed to make it through. It was wonderful.

Since then Sunny has enjoyed many repeat customers at the Library. One parent even brought Sunny homemade dog cookies. He thought they were yummy! We have met some lovely children through this program and hope our efforts are helping forward their education and promote a true love for books!

I'm proud to report that because of his work as a therapy dog, Sunny has now earned his Working Samoyed title through the Samoyed Club of America. Sunny also became a daddy in 2003, to his daughter Seville (Mythicals Joi Ride T'Landmark). I hope one day she, too, can participate as a pet partner. She has the most delightful personality and I can definitely see her becoming a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation therapy dog! In the meantime, she enjoys pack hiking with dad! Yet again, more wonderful first experiences that Sunny has helped make happen!



Looking back, I am grateful to my parents for having brought Snowball into my life and allowing me to learn at a very early age the importance of the human-animal bond. I'm exhilarated that Sunny and I have been able to accomplish so much together and hopefully have made other people's lives a little brighter along the way! It's been a wonderful ride with Sunny and I look forward to many years to come.



*Editor's Comments: Sunny is not only a champion in the dog show world, he is also a champion to the children whose lives he has touched. Thalia, you're not the only one who is grateful that your parents taught you about the human-animal bond at an early age. We're very proud to have you and Sunny on the team! Thank you for all you do and especially for brightening our day with the wonderful infectious smile that you both have!*

*Some quotes:*

*"The handlers and dogs are absolutely WONDERFUL!!! This program has really sparked an interest in reading for children that have participated. Parents have told us that their children are more enthusiastic about reading and they enjoy practicing their skills in preparation for reading to the dogs." (Amanda Whitt, Children's Librarian, Highlands Ranch Library)*

*"Gryffin, Romeo and I, we all enjoy working with Thalia and Sunny at Shots for Tots. They are a happy and joyful team to work with. Their demeanor seems to help kids stay calm*

*and relaxed before and after the shots. Having two greyhounds, I cannot imagine what it takes to keep Sunny's beautiful coat so clean and fluffy." (Mino Fuller, fellow Pet Partner and team-mate)*