

## *Tovi's Story*



When one daughter graduated from school and left home, taking a cat with her, we decided the time was right for a new family dog. It had been six years since we had lost our beautiful lab/collie mix. I researched different breeds, wanting to find a dog we could absolutely trust around people. I decided on a Russian breed, a Samoyed, since it was well known for being friendly. Bred to be companions, "Sammies" are also known for being calm and quiet, qualities which finalized our decision. One of my husband's colleagues suggested we contact All-Breeds Rescue, which directed us to the Denver Samoyed Rescue (DSR).

Soon DSR located a puppy which had been abandoned in a northern Utah wilderness. The family which found him was the de-facto animal shelter in their rural area, taking in all kinds of strays. Meanwhile they had house-trained him, had him walking well on leash and even taught him some commands. Sight unseen we wanted him. He sounded like he also had the personality we sought.

The first attempt to send him to us was thwarted by Salt Lake City International Airport personnel deciding the weather was too cold for him in cargo. It seemed ironic that temperatures were too low for an Artic breed dog. Two weeks later, a second lengthy drive with his rescuers to Salt Lake's Airport was successful. Very excited we drove to Denver's Airport. He was a very cute forty pounds with a very sweet, expressive face. It was love at first sight. His beautiful biscuit color, golden ears, four-month-old long legs and oversized paws promised a big adult dog.

A Siberian dog needed a Russian name so we named him "Tovaresch," which means companion. Soon Tovi was truly our companion, even eating through a wooden gate just to be with us. Much like an intelligent child, Tovi shapes up right away when I use his full name. He loves to please.

Since Tovi was a sled dog breed, eventually capable of pulling several hundred pounds, we decided to enroll him in obedience classes. He learned so fast, passed beginning and advanced obedience, right on to earning his Canine Good Citizen's certificate on the first try. We soon

found out how smart he really was. Tovi loves eating ice cubes. He watched me several times get ice cubes from outside the freezer door and soon was helping himself. Once he accidentally pushed the button and rolled down a car window. Now he and I ride in the car with the child lock on so he can't provide ventilation at will. He even knows that the engine has to be started before the windows will work



Tovi has always been friendly with those he meets. On our routine walks by elementary and middle schools, he pouts if a student doesn't stop to pet him. Fortunately, he is so invitingly fluffy and sweet that that doesn't happen very often. He likes children so much, that he was once named an honorary member of one daughter's Girl Scout Troop. After greeting each girl, he then would sit surrounded by everyone during the Troop meeting.

I thought his friendliness would make him a good therapy dog. At the time I was disappointed to find that the nearest certification location was in Cheyenne, Wyoming, so forgot about it for a few years. Then, one day at the vet's I met a person getting her dog's health certification for Delta Society and Denver Pet Partners. I asked her for information; she directed me to the DPP website. Throughout the classroom instruction everything sounded so perfect for us. During the DPP evaluation with Tovi I was afraid we wouldn't pass. In March 2003, we were certified with a predictable rating.

Soon we were visiting at a children's home for physically and mentally disabled girls in Aurora. Tovi was very popular. His size made him less likely to be injured by awkward petting or uncontrolled movements. Later on we started visiting at a group home for boys. The boys especially liked that Tovi was a big dog which would run in the backyard with them. They learned to pet him with open, gentle hands, and brush with long smooth motions. When the children asked him to "sit" they felt empowered as Tovi obeys. The anticipation of Tovi's next visit helped improve the boys' overall skills. We have been visiting at the boys' home for a year and a half. A few of the original boys are still there; some have moved on, replaced by others.



When I become discouraged and think our visits are possibly too repetitious, something will happen to show that our coming really does make a difference. For example, after visiting for several weeks at the home for boys, a boy who had been watching us from a distance got up the courage to approach and pet Tovi. The staff was very surprised since as a young boy he had been mauled by a dog and was extremely afraid of them. Now it is almost routine that he comes over to pet Tovi for a few minutes.

We also visit at the Denver Children's home. The boys we have visited seem to have greater popularity with their peers for having been chosen special enough to participate in animal-assisted therapy. This privilege shows that they can be popular without being tough or doing negative acting out. The boys say it is good that Tovi is a "macho" dog, and not a little "girlie" dog. You can see the pride in each face when we walk around the block together and people tell each boy what a good-

looking dog he has.

After visiting at only children's facilities, I decided that we needed to broaden our horizons. We went through hospice volunteer training with Namaste Comfort Care. Now we have visited eight patients during their final days and weeks, some for just a couple of visits, some over several months. When we visit a hospice patient, we eventually visit the entire nursing home. The patients love to see the sweet dog with all the fur. He is so soft; you can lose your hand in its engulfing warmth. He also has an affectionate lick for everyone. The nursing staff always appreciates this welcome break from the challenges of caring for those in the nursing homes.

An especially memorable visit was with a new client who indicated she was in pain. I spoke to the nurse who kept telling her the pain medication would start working soon. While we were visiting, the client reached over the side of the bed to pet Tovi for a few minutes, which seemed to ease her pain. We found out later that she had been hospitalized in hopes of controlling the pain. During the next week's visit, the nurse reported that the patient talked extensively about the nice dog that had come to visit her. On our next visit the patient was crying because she wanted to go home. Tovi positioned himself close to her for petting, her crying stopped, and she continued to pet him until she fell asleep. The nurse told us how timely and soothing our visit was.

On our next visit this patient was lying on a mattress on the floor and unresponsive. Tovi pushed his head under her hand and laid down beside her. After a while he licked her hand before we left. She died later that night. Her family told us that we had brought joy and comfort during the last days of her life.

"Tovaresh"... What a wonderful companion dog you are to us and to others!



Editors Note: *One of the defining characteristics of a fine therapy team is the ability to adapt to a variety of visit environments. Considering how different visiting young energetic boys in a group home is to sharing the last moments of someone's life with them in hospice, this clearly requires an advanced level of skills and aptitude. It requires the skills to cope with often unpredictable and upsetting circumstances and the aptitude to look beyond a client's situation to seek and truly interact with the person within. Denice and Tovi, you embody these defining characteristics and display them with each visit you make. Both of you working as a team exemplify wonderful facets of the human-animal bond and you are to be commended for your influence. We're fortunate to have you on board and are pleased to name you Denver Pet Partner "Team of the Month". Thank you for all you do.*

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