



Laura Ackerman and Addie



In 1999, my husband and I adopted a dog who should have come with an instruction manual. We thought we were experienced owners who could deal with almost anything, but this dog proved us wrong - time and time again. We soon knew why the adoption counselor at the humane society had looked at our adoption application and said, "You're experienced owners; you can deal with this." We named our new family member Bob the Dog and began searching for a dog trainer who could help us work with him. After a few false starts, we found a wonderful trainer and went to obedience classes almost weekly for a year. Eventually we grew bored with the same exercises but I wanted to continue training Bob. I've always loved taking training classes with my dogs and I've always been fascinated by different kinds of

working dogs. Fortunately, right around that time the instructor started offering a therapy dog class. We signed up for the class to give us a new challenge, and in 2001 Bob and I took the Delta Society (the forerunner of Pet Partners) evaluation test and became a therapy dog and handler team. Due to time constraints and other factors, Bob and I never did do any therapy animal work, but from that point forward I knew of Delta Society/Pet Partners and the wonderful work they did. Bob, by the way, grew to be a beloved family member and one of those dogs that everybody always asked about. We lost Bob over five years ago, but everybody who knew him still has a Bob story to share. My story about therapy dog work with my current dog, Addie, starts with Bob, because without him I don't know if I would have become involved with Pet Partners.

In 2012, almost a year after Bob died, a three-month-old Bernese Mountain Dog puppy named Addie joined our family. We'd never had a Berner before, but I'd long been attracted to the breed. Despite the initial thought that we'd get a smaller dog this time, we were swayed by the kind disposition of a friend's Berner, our love for large dogs, and a visit to see Addie and her brothers and sisters not long after they were born. Addie's mother walked in, sat on my lap (all 80 pounds of her), and became my friend in 3 seconds. We traveled to

Washington state to get Addie and fell in love with her instantly. We joked that she had my husband wrapped around her not so little puppy paw and hoped she wouldn't grow too large, because we'd met some awfully large Berners.





From the start, she was sweet, kind, adaptable, easy to get along with, and attracted attention wherever she went. We took her lots of places to expose her to different things and started taking training classes when she was old enough. She was easy to train, calm, and quiet, and at some point during training I realized she would probably make a good therapy dog. When we'd worked our way through the levels of obedience class, Addie passed her Canine Good Citizen (CGC) test with my husband handling her while I was handling our other dog. I took the Pet Partners handler's course (because if you haven't taken it in 13 years, you apparently need a little refresher), and early in 2014, three months before Addie's second birthday, she passed her evaluation. I was so proud of her!

Due to my geographic location and a schedule that can be crazy at times, I could not commit to visiting on a regular basis at any of the facilities where DPP's teams work. So we participated in a lot of one-time events, such as visiting DU, Arapahoe Community College, and the Air Force Academy for student de-stressing; representing DPP at Whole Foods; attending reading events at various schools, libraries, and the State Department of Education; and visiting DIA just before Christmas and Spring Break.

It was amazing to see how happy people were when they had a dog to visit with for just a few minutes. One traveler at the airport told me how much she hated to fly, and how the chance to hug a dog relieved her stress. Students at colleges told me how much they missed their dogs at home and how having a chance to visit with a dog would help them get through finals week. At the IHAC



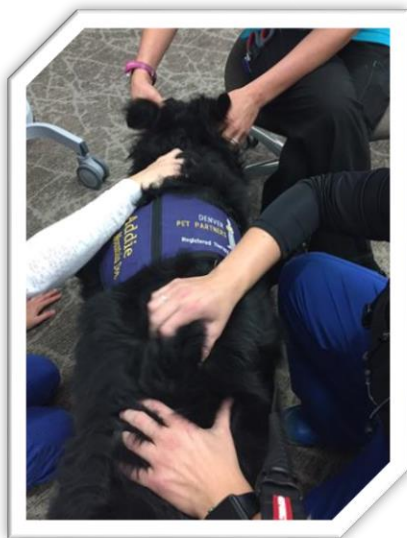
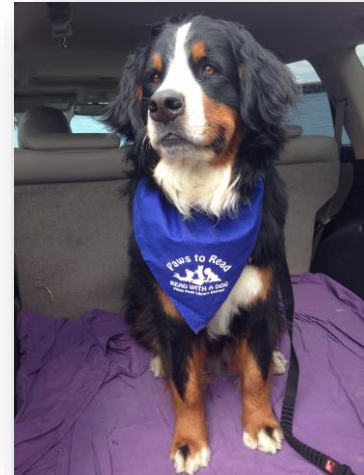
conference at DU in 2016, I had Addie with me and we were seated in a spot that I thought would give her lots of room to stretch out and see what was going on. For some reason, she was restless and seemed unhappy and I was debating whether to leave and take her home, when I noticed she had wandered over to a man sitting next to me. She had crawled behind his legs and was lying there, happily. I apologized to the man and started to move her and he said, "No, it's OK, she's helping me. Really. You can leave her there." He said it with such intensity that I left her there until she wanted to move. I don't know what that man was experiencing, but whatever it was, she was helping him through it.

On Christmas Day, 2015, we visited at a senior living facility that we don't normally visit. Most residents were busy with their families and we didn't get to see many people, but a family in the assisted living section asked us to come into their mother's room and visit



her. The 90-year-old woman sat in a chair while Addie sat by her feet. As the woman petted Addie, she talked about her dog and how her daughter was taking care of the dog while the woman temporarily lived in assisted care before moving back to independent living, where the dog could live with her. We discussed how wonderful it would be to have the dog with her again. As I left the room, the daughter confided to me that her mother would not be able to move back to independent living and would not be able to have a dog live with her again, so visits like this one meant a lot. That one visit made the whole day worthwhile.

Shortly after we passed our evaluation, a new Adventist hospital opened in Castle Rock, not far from where I live. I asked the volunteer office if they would be implementing a therapy animal program, and they told me that they were not quite ready to do that yet. Fortunately, in 2016, thanks to the work of DPP members Linda Tieman and Meme Martin, Castle Rock Adventist Hospital (CRAH) started their Angel Paws program, which is staffed primarily by DPP dogs, and Addie became one of their dogs. For the past six months we have visited the hospital weekly, visiting with patients, staff, and visitors in the hospital and adjacent medical building. It has been an amazing experience. Everyone at the hospital has been so welcoming and the nurses especially love to see the dogs. The pediatric dentist in the medical building has invited us to visit his patients and staff any time and several other practitioners have asked if we can visit with them.



Over the months we've visited with many people at the hospital and I like to think we've made a lot of people's days a little better, if only for a few minutes. As I entered the Emergency Department (ED) one day to visit with the staff, one nurse practically threw herself down on the floor and hugged Addie and said, "I really needed this today. It's been a bad day." Before I knew it, five nurses were on the floor hugging my dog and thanking her for being there. The staff frequently asks if I can just leave Addie there and come back later – much later – for her. Another day, as I entered the ED I noticed an older woman sitting alone in the waiting area. I asked if she'd like to visit with my dog and she

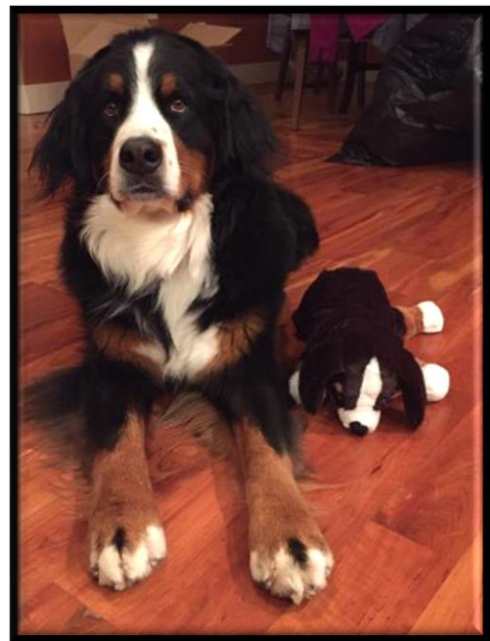
said yes. At first I thought she was there waiting for someone who was being treated, but I eventually realized she was there alone for treatment. We sat with her until she was taken into the treatment area and she told me stories about the dogs she had owned while she stroked Addie, who happily settled down at her feet. This is a common occurrence at



the hospital. People just need to pet a furry body for a few minutes and sometimes they need someone to talk to. A dog opens up opportunities for conversation that wouldn't be there if the dog were not there. Although I've had to learn to make some polite conversation, I mostly have had to learn to just sit and be quiet and listen while Addie works her magic.

My favorite story at the hospital involves a staff member in Surgical Services who absolutely loves dogs. I always make sure to stop and visit his office. As I approached his office one day, I could hear him on the phone. As I got to his door, I waited away from the door, to see if he'd be off the phone soon. But he spotted me and I heard him say, "Mom, I gotta go. Addie's here to see me." He quickly hung up the phone and I said to him, "You hung up on your mother for a dog?" "She'd understand," he said, "she'd understand."

CRAH has such a wonderful program – it's been a great place to visit on a regular basis, especially for a first hospital experience. It's a relatively small, calm, and quiet environment, so Addie and I have been able to work on our skills and figure out what works best for us and the people we're visiting. When I started working as a therapy dog handler, I didn't realize how stressful the visits could be for our animals. I was more worried about myself and how I would deal with different environments and people. I now realize that we have to be ever vigilant and speak up for our animal partners when they are not in the right environment or when they've had enough for the day. Not every dog wants to visit a busy hospital with strange sights, sounds, and smells, just as not every dog wants to



sit and read with small children. And sometimes dogs have an off day, just as we do, and we need to end our visits early. My dog is so willing and so trusting, and it's my job to protect her. The bond between a handler and animal is an amazing thing, and it is up to the handler to protect the animal and preserve the bond. When we reevaluated in 2016, the evaluator commented that Addie really trusted me, meaning that she was willing to do things for me if I told her they were OK. I take that trust seriously and try hard to respect it.

I am so fortunate to have such a wonderful and willing partner. She's a good ambassador for DPP and therapy dogs. We often encounter people who have questions about therapy dogs or who think they are service dogs and I always try to take time to talk to them and answer their questions. During the month of December Addie attended a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution to discuss the work therapy animals do, spent a Friday evening at Talbots for the DPP shopping fundraiser, visited the hospital, and helped de-stress travelers and others at Denver International Airport. She's been in

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hospitals, senior living facilities, libraries, schools, universities, The Air Force Academy, the airport, Whole Foods during a torrential rainstorm with hundreds of people packed around her, and at a Fall Festival with crowds and costumes and loud music, and always tries to be a good representative of what a therapy dog is. She's visited with little kids and college students and seniors and is always patient and kind. I, in return, try to keep a close eye on her and make sure she's not in situations that make her uncomfortable or anxious. After an afternoon of work, we come home and she has a good run and a nap. Did I mention how much she loves her naps?

