



Kathy Massa and Athena



Athena became a member of our family at eight weeks old, and she was the typical bundle of puppy energy and naughtiness. In fact, through four months of age, we struggled with breaking a terrible nipping behavior. We tried every trick recommended in articles and books and talked to our breeder and vet. We were at our wits' end when suddenly at four months of age, Athena became a much more typical puppy with the nipping behavior suddenly stopping.

At less than a year old, we first noticed how gentle Athena was around children. There was a special needs child who lived down the street from us, and as my husband and I

were walking Athena one evening, we noticed that the little girl, who was outside with her parents, was interested in petting Athena but was a little reluctant. Athena, who adores children, also wanted to say hi to the little girl. Sensing the child's reluctance, Athena laid down on the ground with her paws outstretched in front of her and let the little girl approach. The little girl was thrilled, and we were in awe. This was when I started thinking about certifying this Golden girl for therapy work.

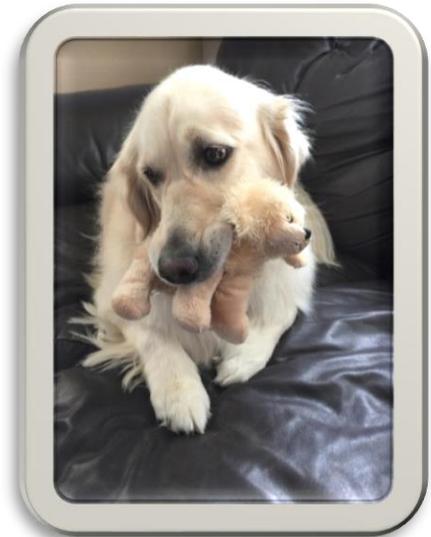


Athena was only a little over a year old when I decided to start training her and give certification a try, fully expecting her not to pass on her first attempt at such a young age, but I worked for several weeks with a wonderful trainer who employed clicker training, and Athena passed her certification! We were ready to start visiting!



For our first few years, Athena and I visited at Swedish Hospital and University of Colorado Hospital. At these venues, Athena and I visited patient rooms, waiting areas, the emergency room, and nurses' stations. The experiences that stand out are those visits to patients who dearly missed their own pets. These were the people who needed some love and affection from a caring dog and were thrilled to just get to pet Athena and hear our story. There were others who, anxiously awaiting news on their loved one, wanted to touch and pet Athena to experience the calming effect that a therapy dog can give. And there were others who just wanted to hug Athena and cry into her soft fur. We found that the staff at the hospitals enjoyed our visits as much as, or possibly more than, the patients and their families. We often heard from the hospital employees that having a dog visit the nurses' station gave them a welcome break from their stressful days, and Athena would happily prance in and greet them all.

After going back to work full time, I needed to adjust my visiting schedule and decided to seek a program where Athena and I could work on weekends. This led us to the program at Devereux in Westminster where we worked with a clinician doing both group therapy and individual therapy. Athena and I worked with a group of boys whose ages ranged from 6 to 18. This was a challenging setting but one that suited Athena quite well. Some boys enjoyed doing tricks with Athena while others just wanted to pet her and spend quiet time with her. In the individual therapy sessions, we would take walks and do tricks, but sometimes the boys just wanted to sit and pet Athena. Some of them even taught her new tricks and some agility maneuvers! In a setting where they are unable to receive physical attention or touch, Athena was able to provide much-needed physical soothing and affection.





Due to some life-changing events in 2016, I made the decision in June to take a break from regular visits at Devereux. Since then, Athena and I have enjoyed participating in special events, especially the United Paws visits at Denver International Airport. This is one of our favorite events, and Athena seems to thrive in that environment. She proudly prances to and from our designated visiting area, and both passengers and crew adore her. Also of special interest to me was an event that we attended in the Estes Park area for children with cancer and their siblings. This was an especially rewarding and emotional event, and we were able to bring smiles to many faces that day.

At this time, I have decided that it is time for Athena and me to retire. Between my work schedule and new interests that I am pursuing, I find that I have little time to commit to regular visits or special events. Athena and I have happily served as a pet therapy team since 2013, and I have been proud of my confident and feisty English Cream Golden Retriever.

