

Karen Johnson and Spruce



The Guide Dog Years

The story starts one Saturday morning in 2003 at the Westminster Public Library. A local puppy raising club was holding an informational meeting about Guide Dogs for the Blind. My husband Ed and I were hooked. Count us in! Before getting Spruce, we co-raised five Labrador retriever puppies along with Debbie Eckhart and Claudia Frisbie (yes, you can share the puppy raising with other families). For our sixth, Guide Dogs asked if we wanted to raise an English Golden Retriever that had been purchased from a breeder in Arkansas. This was really a change, since as you'll see if you watch the 2018 movie "Pick of the Litter" (Netflix), Guide Dogs has its own breeding program. So getting a dog from outside meant there could be behaviors we hadn't seen before.

Hundreds of puppies are born into Guide Dog's breeding program every year. The litters are named in alphabetical order. The four English Golden Retrievers, born before Christmas, were in an "S" litter. They were named Sugar, Spice, Schroeder and Spruce. Spruce was assigned to Debbie and Claudia and us at the Northglenn club. The others went to puppy raisers in Boulder, Littleton and Salt Lake City. By the training regimen, Spruce had to be with a puppy raiser 24/7 until it was time to switch to professional training at a Guide Dog campus in California or Oregon. During our share of the co-raising, Spruce went to the kindergarten where I taught or to the Adams County Courthouse where Ed is a judge. Spruce went with us everywhere -- the grocery store, hair and doctor appointments, shopping. Everywhere. And every minute of every day was part of the training. So, no, the kindergarten kids could NOT pet him -- he's in training. And, no, the courthouse folks could NOT pet him. He's in training. He has to learn to focus on his blind partner.





As Spruce matured we noticed some concerning behaviors. He was insecure around statues, and Halloween scarecrows, and department store mannequins. Spruce was confused by things that *looked like* people but didn't act like people. More than once the relative quiet at Macy's was interrupted by the sounds of a dog barking at a mannequin (followed by our quick exit from the store). Otherwise, Spruce was a nice, happy, friendly sort. It turned out that Spruce and his three siblings were "soft dogs," more suited to a different type of work than seeing eye dogs. All four were "career changed." Spruce became ours!

A riddle

What has four legs, many hours of training and a happy tail? Answer: A Denver Pet Partners dog! Spruce couldn't continue going to kindergarten as a Guide Dog trainee. But with the principal's permission he could go as a registered therapy dog. Spruce was first tested and registered with Delta Dogs which later merged with Pet Partners.

The kindergarten years

Spruce went to Prairie Hill Elementary kindergarten with me most every day. As a therapy dog, he could now be petted. He'd wait quietly under the reading table. When the little students finished a reading assignment they slid off their chair, slipped under the table, and petted Spruce. Finishing enough reading assignments earned a "Spruce card."

Besides serving as a reading incentive, Spruce worked with kids who needed some comfort. It wasn't unusual to hear the principal announce over the loudspeaker, "Spruce, please report to the special needs room," or "Spruce, please report to the office." Then off he and I would go to calm a child in need of a four-legged friend. His work became so well known in the school district that he and I were invited to a school board meeting to explain the work of a school therapy dog.





When kindergarten pictures were taken, Spruce's was taken, too. When the kindergarten class received t-shirts with their names on them, there was Spruce's paw print. When it was reading week at the library, there was Spruce. (Well, except when custodian Keith Kahler marched around the library dressed as Clifford the Big Red Dog. When that was scheduled, Spruce enjoyed a vacation day.) Eventually, I retired from teaching. Spruce needed another job.

Retirement?

Spruce and I had already been visiting Broomfield Skilled Nursing where my mother-in-law was living but we were looking for something else. At one of our DPP meetings I learned about animal assisted therapy sessions at the Cleo Wallace campus of Devereux Behavioral Health Services in Westminster. The campus includes residential services for adolescents with significant mental health and behavioral needs. We participated in weekly group therapy sessions led by a licensed clinical social worker who integrated the calming effect of a fluffy white dog and my experiences in elementary and special needs education.

Courthouse victim's assistance

The victim's assistance program at the Adams and Broomfield County courthouses added a therapy dog component to its programs. It was a perfect fit for Spruce who had visited the courthouses when he was a Guide Dog puppy in training. Spruce and I with other Denver Pet Partner teams (including Debbie Eckhart and Pugsly, and Joan Meyers and Cloud, both from the Guide Dog program & DPP) hold regular "office hours" at the courthouses. The dogs are a reassuring presence for both adults and children who are involuntary participants in the legal system.

Personal therapy

The last year has presented a different challenge for our family. In fall of 2017, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Mastectomy surgery came the day before Thanksgiving 2017, followed by chemotherapy, followed by radiation, followed by RECOVERY! Luckily, I had Spruce who knew just how to be my own personal therapy dog. Spruce now has another accolade to add to his resume and I am so grateful.



DPP Team of the Month (January 2019)

