



## *Karen Hughes and Gus*



Our story started as mine, 9 years ago. I'm a Breast Cancer survivor. That's when my re-birthday happened, and I had a therapy dog visit as I exited the hospital. It felt like a sign that life was going to be okay...I--was going to be okay.

I went back to work and found I no longer felt enjoyment or fulfillment. After three more years, I quit. My husband said, "You don't have to work, but you DO need to do something!". Our dog at the time of my recovery was no longer with us...she was 17 when we laid her down the previous year. I started looking for dogs online, different breeds, different breeders. I knew the next one had to be mellow, easy going and a friendly breed. How can you decide that online?

It was just after Christmas that I walked into a local Pet shop "just to look". I wanted to rescue (our other 2 dogs were rescues), but felt I needed to start brand new with a puppy because I wanted to try to raise it to do therapy work. I spied a big

red one (didn't know the breed) in a bin with 2 boxer puppies that were going psycho, melted into the corner...just chillin! Every dog in the place was barking, but him. I asked what kind of breed he was and was told a golden doodle. Didn't know what that was or how big he would get, but his eyes got me!

I told my husband and my son (who was living with us at the time) to check out this dog, individually, and see if they felt the same since this is a family and everyone needs to be on the same page. After 3 days of deciding, my son looked at me and asked, "What are we waiting for?" We had no supplies, no crate, no food...so, we wrapped him in a blanket to bring him home and surprised my husband on New Years Day 2015. Truly a purchase of the heart!

Thus began our journey of becoming a therapy team. I signed us up for classes the next day, took him everywhere with me so he could experience the world and be okay with different sights, smells and sounds. That's what Connie said to do. Con was a college buddy of mine that had been doing therapy work for years (at least 15-20), so I started asking questions. She worked with Gabriel's Angels in Phoenix. I asked what was equivalent to that here in Denver and she suggested Pet Partners.

I went to a Denver Pet Partners meeting, met some of the staff and teams, and felt confident we could do it! Our trainer, Jill, worked with us to prepare, but Gus was only two and very puppyish! I signed up for an evaluation and didn't really expect to pass but did! Barely! Gus





was described as “over-exuberant” and rated predictable. So much for my “calm, chill” first impression of him. He did, however, have the demeanor and willingness to want to “visit” everyone...one of the traits they said was essential for success as a therapy dog. Now, to prepare myself!

Our first year included fun filled destress events. I didn't really have any place in mind to visit regularly, so I relied on the emails from DPP asking for teams to participate. There were plenty of opportunities and we experienced so much love and eagerness that I knew I'd found my “new” calling! My new purpose in life! The excitement on people's faces to meet and engage with our dogs is a feeling I can't describe.

A few of the most special moments have been life changing. The first time Gus leaned into a wheelchair on cue! I'd worked with him on that for a couple years and then, it clicked! DU destress event.

Working downtown at the Samaritan House I listened to kids and their parents in the Family unit about when they had a dog...or, when they get a home what kind of dog they'd get, all the while enjoying the presence of the teams that were there to give them the sense of hope and love - really touching. We also visited the Veterans Unit. It gets pretty heavy there and the moods just lighten up when they see the dogs!



Going to Camp WapiYapi, a camp for kids with cancer-either in remission or recovered--and their families. Focus on today, right now! Make the most of the moment...the comfort of touching, hugging and being with a furry friend brings joy to their eyes! Something I can relate too in more ways than anyone knows.

To watch some overcome their fear of dogs is amazing! Just to see them touch Gus's back or butt because they are afraid of his head. Him just standing there, waiting patiently for them. It could be the average person or those with disabilities, mental or physical, and he's on task. He also has learned how to hold back his eagerness...well, sort of (wink), cuz he's still a little “over exuberant”.and I think that's what sets him apart and is really part of his appeal.

We've done soooo many events and experienced sooo many different reactions that it's hard to point to the most impactful, but one was totally unexpected. The Tiemans are long-standing members and a husband/wife team with Denver Pet Partners. Their most recent therapy dog, Dillion, passed this last year. Gus and I had the pleasure of visiting with them at Rocky Vista. Dilly was reaching the end of his service, but still enjoyed showing up for the students. His human dad is a Dr./professor at RVU, so I had a feeling he was a regular in the school, as well



## *DPP Team of the Month (November 2019)*

DENVER PET PARTNERS



as local hospitals. We heard of Dillion's passing while on a separate visit to RVU a couple days after. Linda came to bring Dr. T a "pick me up" treat and came over to see us. Gus went straight to her, leaned in and just knew. We both teared up and she said it was just what she needed. To be on the other side of the work they had done with their dogs for so many years and then to have the need for that same comfort in consoling them reiterated how important this work is. Even, or should I say "especially" to those that have been entrenched in the purpose of AAI work...was so touching! Because we know! Our animals know!

I always tell people now that I have the best job in the world, and I don't get paid a dime! I get paid in appreciation and love! What better purpose in life is there?

