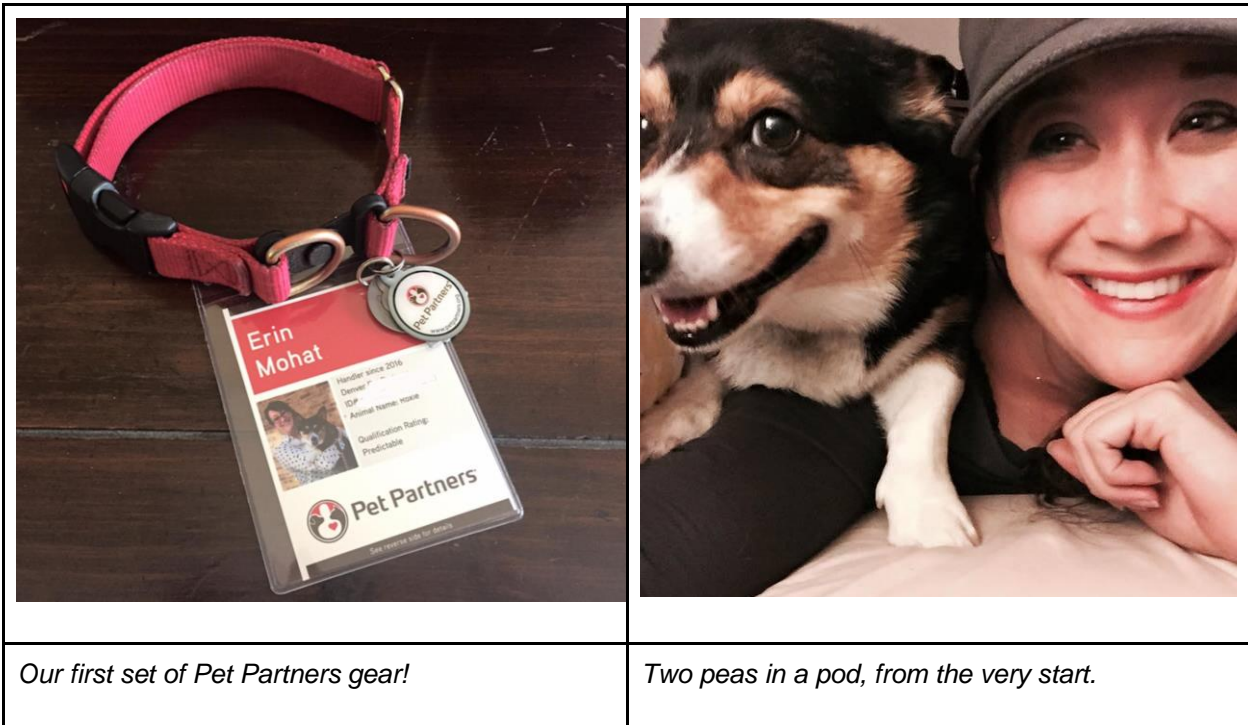


Erin Mohat and Roxie

Finding Roxie

It all started with searching for a dog that would be up for the task of volunteering with me. My father had begun volunteering with a therapy dog organization back in Ohio, and it really opened my eyes to the possibilities; however, finding THE dog to do this work with me was proving to be quite a task. I took a long time meeting various shelter dogs, looking at online postings, talking to rescue groups. My friends were telling me, “Oh goodness, pick a dog, any dog will do!” But I didn’t want just any dog -I was looking for my furry soul-mate!

In 2011, I went so far as to drive 3.5 hrs to Wyoming to meet dogs through the Wyoming Dachshund & Corgi Rescue. That’s where Roxie and I found each other. I was supposed to meet 3 dogs that day, but Roxie let me know that she was the one. She was more interested in the people than the other dogs, and she seemed comfortable with me right away; I could tell that she’d be a great dog to do this kind of volunteer work. She sat on my foot and looked up at me as if to say, “Ok, can we get out of here now?” And so, we did. We left to set out on our *many* adventures.



The most common question: Training

We are so often asked, “So... how did you train your dog to be a therapy dog?” And the funny thing is, we are by no means some kind of model for that process. Training for this goal was a long, arduous journey, with many diversions, as well as my own insecurities to work through. I



had NO idea what I was doing. Roxie was the first dog I was training, and although I could tell Roxie was AMAZING, I was nervous if I was a good enough handler and trainer for this.

We had to start with some desensitization training on the 16th Street Mall. When I first got Roxie, I found out rather quickly that she was extremely fearful of men with hats or beards; the combination of the two leading to submissive urination. Thankfully though, she was very food motivated. So, we made a game seeing how many gentlemen out walking the mall, fitting that aforementioned description, would be kind enough to hand her a treat for me. Before long she was trying to pull me to anyone on the mall with facial hair, beards, strollers, wheelchairs, and so on -she had reached a paradise where anyone was a potential treat provider! From there we tried Obedience, Tricks, Agility, Flyball, CGC, and eventually Therapy Dog Training classes.... We tried it all.

I even went so far as taking Roxie to 4th of July pool parties, Halloween costume parties (in costume), Pride Parades, Renaissance Festivals, wrestling events at the Watering Bowl, The Tour de Corgi in Fort Collins, camping, costumed theme runs, and all sorts of other things. I did this under the premise that these would increase her exposure to the unfamiliar, as well as increase her confidence, but really she was such a joy to everyone, that I just wanted her there. While I doubt she's the only corgi on the planet to have ridden an elephant, she now had the confidence to act like that is the case.



Therapy Dog Class - "handling" activity



"Exposure Therapy" - Pride Parade



Ongoing Volunteering:

We finally started volunteering with Denver Pet Partners in 2016. We started at the Brookdale Pinehurst Park Memory Care Unit, making the same “new” friends each week. We even had the pleasure of being in a promotional photo shoot for Pet Partners. It was an absolute joy to see residents come to life when remembering their stories of their childhood pets or preventing “sundowning” thanks to the excitement of a walk with Roxie. From there, we transitioned to tutoring at The Bridge Project, but our time here was short-lived. With no ill-will or malintent, some of the students had figured out they could knock on the door and causing Roxie to bark. Although they found this endlessly delightful and humorous, from working in education, I knew a constantly barking dog was not the best for a learning environment. We ended up moving on to a new volunteering opportunity.

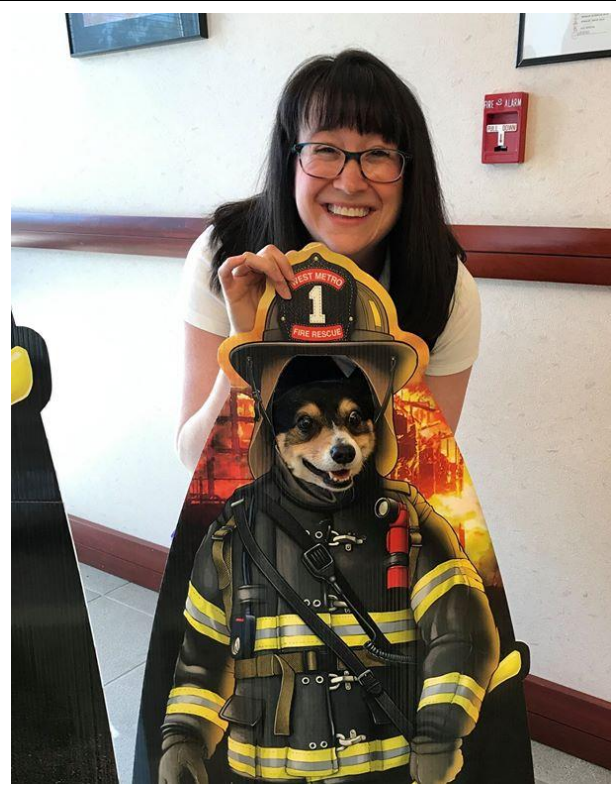


Promo photos/video for Pet Partners at Brookdale in 2016

We then transitioned to our current volunteering homes - Flourish Group Homes (prior to the COVID19 closures, we were visiting their home for women with dementia) and Jeffcom911 visiting dispatchers for some well-deserved de-stress time. Building relationships with the women at Flourish was an absolute privilege and I can only hope they remember me when we are able to reunite once this is done. (I trust that we’ll be able to rebuild those bonds if they’ve forgotten.) Jeffcom has been an absolute inspiration. The way emergency responders and dispatchers manage emergencies in our communities is astounding. Although I work in the schools as a mental health provider, I don’t know that I have the executive functioning skills or strength of character to manage such tasks with such a calm and professional demeanor. It takes a special person to support our communities in these ways and I always leave these sessions with gratitude for those who care for us in our hours of greatest need.



Flourish Group Home



Lobby of Jeffcom 911

De-stress & Memorial Events:

Roxie and I have also had the pleasure in attending several de-stress events at various locations (the airport for several years, a local high school), as well as the honor of supporting families grieving at memorial services at Mt Olivet Cemetery. I have loved seeing people light up at the airport, when they see a corgi among the volunteer therapy dogs. Flight attendants, pilots, and travelers alike, running with their arms outstretched, eager to give Roxie's big "bat ears" a gentle pat. Equally fulfilling was watching the stress of finals week melt away during students' time with volunteers and dogs in the main hall of JFK High School. Several students wished aloud that they could have a therapy dog present at all of their tests, thanking the teams for the soothing company. As for the memorial services, I will forever hold the stories families have shared with me, close to my heart. There were moments where Roxie calmly approached families, knowing just who needed her, while families were remembering and honoring their lost loved ones. There is something precious about the vulnerability we share, when we tell these stories, and I am so tremendously lucky that others found me a safe person with whom to share them.



Denver International Airport - Holiday Travel De-stress Events



JFK High School - Finals De-stress Event

Where do we go from here?

Roxie and I have loved our time volunteering. As she ages, I'm watching for signs of stress, or any signals that her time is done. At 11 years old, I hopefully have several good more years with her, but I want to make sure that this time is always about honoring what Roxie enjoys and wants to do. So far, she shows no signs of wanting to give up her time at Flourish or Jeffcom, so, COVID19 willing, we'll return to those activities once this is clear; however, I know my girl has many more adventures in store. From being a model for Kong, to a "mountain goat" climbing hillsides across Colorado, I know this pocket-sized pooch is powerful enough to do anything. All I can hope to do is hang on for the ride where it takes us and enjoy each moment as we go.