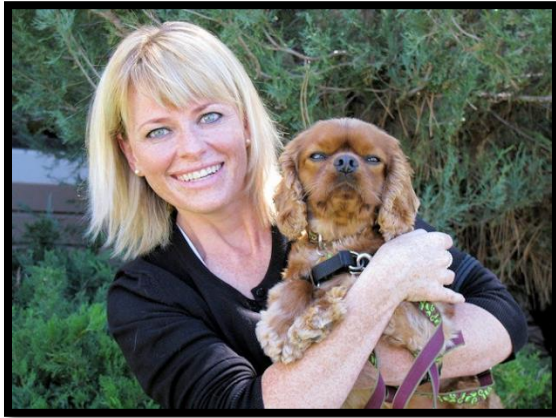


Stacy Mercord and Sam



As anyone reading this knows, a dog can change your life. They can teach you how to be a better, more caring human. Sam did this for me.

I was living in Bavaria, Germany and working on a US army base. Traveling Europe with venturous friends was both fun and mostly fulfilling, but there was just something missing. After some contemplation and research, what turned out to be missing was an outgoing, little red Spaniel puppy. And once I found him, he moved right in.

Immediately Sam became part of the crew. Saturdays Sam would ride the train to go shopping in Nuremberg with all of us. He would lay on my lap as the bucolic, green Bavarian countryside whirled by out the train window, sleeping away getting ready for the adventure. He loved chasing the pigeons in the market square and investigating all the smells at the different booths. In cafes he would slip under the table or sit on the lap to wait for the treats that almost always came from the back kitchen.



In addition to his adaptability, one of Sam's personality traits I noticed right away was his social nature. He would seek out people while walking through the parks or biergartens, approaching them and expecting a pet. Germans adore dogs and integrate them in society much more than in the US, which fostered his behavior. This socialization as a pup interwoven with his personality laid the groundwork for his ability to be a therapy dog.

Thus, one summer while visiting back home in Colorado I found Denver Pet Partners online. Lucky enough there was training for potential handlers and an evaluation before I had to return to Germany. Attending that training and starting therapy work with Sam deepened both of our lives.



After returning to base from our initial evaluation in 2010, we started working at the school library listening to middle schoolers read. A program that initially took some convincing to start, but soon became a hit. We had more students signed up than time slots, and what was once a weekly reading program expanded, ending up in the local army news. It became apparent that Sam's presence was more than a listening ear, but a true comfort as many of the students were experiencing high levels of stress due to the rate and duration of parent deployments. Soon senators' wives and ranking Department of Defense members

that tour base schools would meet Sam and hear about how the human animal bond can help foster resilience during turbulent times.

DPP Team of the Month (October 2020)

DENVER PET PARTNERS



Returning to the states allowed for more opportunities in various environments. In addition to schools we started volunteering at children's hospitals, Gilda's Club, cancer walks, courts, and various residence facilities. Sam would sit on the lap of a child processing a sibling's cancer diagnosis or lay on the bed of a teenager alone in the hospital. His

presence was enough for most to concentrate on him for a bit of time. His soft copper fur, floppy ears and thoughtful, big brown eyes provided a brief respite in the midst of hardship.



At this time, I created a lesson for school children in how to meet, greet, and treat pups. I noticed many of the children we came across in our volunteer work were not taught how to pet dogs or meet them safely and respectfully due to excitement. I added that curriculum to our volunteer work whenever possible to make sure children understood how to treat canine friends, and not just the other way around.



As the years have passed like all of us, Sam has aged. He is 14 now and slowed down considerably. He sleeps more, takes medications, and doesn't hear as well as he once did. I have become protective of his time and slowed his visiting. This is difficult as he still looks up at me expectantly when I go to the door, as he is so used to going through it with me on our way to some new visit or adventure.

But even rock stars retire, and Sam deserves to as well. He should spend his time napping, taking gentle walks through the fall leaves, and getting snacks that are a little too rich. He has listened to people's stories, secrets and troubles, and now it is time to just hear the birds chirping in the backyard. I need to provide that for him as he has done so much for me. He has changed my life and taught me how to be a better, more caring human. As anyone reading this knows dogs can do.

