

Dawn Andres and Dolly



♪ Hello Dolly!! ♪

That's exactly what I said when this 10-week-old, sweet little ball of white fluff, landed in my arms, a birthday present from my husband. I'd always had Labrador retrievers in the past, and one by one, lab after lab, my heart was broken when they crossed the proverbial "bridge". I wanted another dog, but I needed something different, so I decided to try a "designer mutt" of the non-shedding variety. I'd heard that poodles were smart and I was excited to train my first golden doodle poodle!! Imagine my surprise when she didn't act like a lab. She was inquisitive, intuitive, aloof, and questioning, not the attached-at-the-hip, goofy, tail wagging, tongue lagging breed I'd grown to love. She would sometimes save her food for later. Who does that? And treats? She could take 'em or leave 'em. How was I supposed to train this dog? Doesn't she like me? Apparently, I was the one that needed training, ha!



After a year or so of attending obedience classes, we began to bond. Being a dancer myself, I was excited to try our hand at musical canine freestyle. Dolly was a star! She loved showing off her dance moves. The various commands, signals, and tricks were what she lived for. Dolly and her classmates visited assisted living homes and adult day care facilities, where they performed solo routines and group routines. But what really struck me was how, after her performances, she seemed to relish the meet-n-greet with the seniors. She would snuggle right up to wheelchairs and walkers and sit calmly while getting her head scratched, nary a sniff at an adult diaper. And that's when I knew... My husband had received a surprise visit from a therapy dog during a past hospital stay and in the back of my mind, I hoped that someday that would be me. It was time.

She began her therapy dog career in that very hospital, bringing joy, comfort, and dance moves to patients and staff in all departments. One of our stand out moments there was at hospice. We visited a woman, alone during the last days of her life. I introduced Dolly to her, repeating her name a little louder so that finally she understood. "Her name is Dolly, like the song", I said, and started to sing Broadway's "Hello Dolly". To my surprise, the woman joined right in. She was able to remember most of the verses as we sang together. Her face was full of joy and her eyes became bright. Together we repeated the song, in tune may I add, over and over. It was difficult to say goodbye, but with a final pet and a bow (one of



Dolly's dance moves), we exited stage left. I told myself that if I never had another moment like that, it'd be OK. But there were so many others.

What a blessing Dolly had become. Unfortunately, the grooming requirements of the hospital/hospice system only allowed for monthly visits and Dolly was bored. We brushed up on our skills and Dolly quickly earned her AKC Canine Good Citizen certification. Dolly began her professional career after applying to a small local pet therapy group. She enjoyed hugs and belly rubs during college exam week, attended adoption proceedings at the municipal courthouse, showed abused and neglected children that they could trust, and even sat pretty at a breast cancer awareness event in an upscale shopping mall. But the gigs were sporadic and Dolly needed more. I'd heard about the therapy dog program at the airport. Dolly jumped through more hoops and was soon a four-legged airport ambassador with security clearance and a badge. One of her most memorable experiences there was when, while on the concourse, we noticed a couple with two children sobbing quietly. They had just gotten off a terrifying flight that had experienced severe wind shear. The parents were so shaken they couldn't make it to baggage claim. They just needed to sit. They were so grateful to see a sweet face with a wagging tail approach them, to bury their tears in her fluff, and decompress from their experience. And Dolly did what she always does when she sees children, dropped and rolled for a belly rub.



But living in the mountains, we were constrained by the time spent getting in and out and travelling to and from the airport. And THAT'S when we discovered Pet Partners!!! This would be our third time to test for a therapy dog membership so why was I so nervous? Maybe because I really wanted opportunities with shorter commutes. And I longed for the support of a professional organization that would help open doors for Dolly in a more consistent way. Of



course, Dolly felt none of this pressure. She just did what she always does, passed her test, and pranced right out the door, hoping to sniff a campus rabbit, stopping only for a team photo. I was so impressed by the immediate show of support from the DPP staff. They were welcoming and communicative. Thanks to DPP, Dolly was soon doing more campus events, prancing around Buckley AFB, being read to at the local library through the PAWS program and making weekly visits to the Jefferson County Courthouse. At the

courthouse, she made friends with several deputies and personnel. But she spent most of her time there in Juvenile Mental Health court, bringing tail wags and smiles to the counselors, defenders, and prosecutors before the proceedings began, and then quietly soothing the anxious kids and their families that entered the courtroom one by one. Many times she'd just plop down in the middle of the aisle and wait for the kids to come to her. I think



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DENVER PET PARTNERS



Dolly figured out that she'd get more attention with less energy if people were forced to step over her. She knew her shift was over when the judge/magistrate would come down from the bench and offer her a treat and a hug in exchange for a trick.

The consistency of pet therapy opportunities provided through DPP and the relationships we've built has made Dolly's career complete. I look forward to the day when Dolly, now at 10+ years, can work again. She's grown accustomed to the slower pace of life since she's been "fur"loughed due to the pandemic. Hiking trails, a Home Depot, or a friend's backyard have become the new stage on which she shows off her dance moves, always in search of an ovation in the form of a head pat, an ear scratch, or a belly rub.....or sometimes even a treat!

