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EMBARKING ON POSITIVE VENTURES: THE GOOD DOG FOUNDATION

By Greg Pace

"We know how sad you are about Ashley, so we got you something." My mother's words made my heart sink.

My pug, Ashley, had just died and I had gone home to see my parents for the weekend. I was afraid that my family had gotten me a 'replacement' dog, a furry little band-aid to help me get over my loss. And then my dad added softly, "We can keep her if you don't want her." I turned to see my father holding a gray and white puppy with a long snout, bushy eyebrows - and a golf shirt.

It was too soon. I didn't want a new dog. But, I eventually decided there was no point in going home sad and alone. So my family won and I took home the new puppy, now named Marti, that Sunday night. I soon learned that a new dog was exactly the therapy I needed.

Even as a puppy, Marti had an obvious gift with people. About a month after I brought her home, someone in the dog park suggested that Marti would be a good therapy dog and told me about the Good Dog Foundation, which trains human-canine teams to provide pet therapy. I thought about how much Marti had helped me after Ashley's death and I immediately applied to be a volunteer.

After an initial consultation, we were accepted into an 11-week training program to learn how to provide pet therapy services to people in need. The dog training focused on control skills, social interaction, and ability to stay calm in unusual situations. My training was about how to communicate with terminally ill patients, people with serious illnesses, or those living with difficult circumstances.

After we graduated, Marti and I began reviewing possible volunteer opportunities that the Good Dog Foundation had coordinated. My mom is a breast cancer survivor and this led us to our first assignment: the Beth Israel Cancer Center in Manhattan. Pfizer was sponsoring a study to see if patients would attend treatments more consistently and would have a better outlook if they were expecting a visit with a therapy dog team.

I was nervous on our first visit to the cancer center. Marti, on the other hand, was eager and as excited as a child on the first day of school. I explained to the receptionist why I was there and asked if my patient had arrived for his treatment. He was late. I took a seat and opened Marti's bag. I could see that the people in the room with us were depressed and scared, crying and quiet. But as soon as Marti popped her head out, the mood changed - it was palpable. The pa-



tients were waiting for chemotherapy treatments and sometimes they'd wait for hours before a machine becomes available. It wasn't a fun place to be, and because of the long waits, patients frequently skipped their treatments.

A woman and her two adult children overheard my conversation with the receptionist and asked if they could say hello to Marti. The family members, who were previously crying, were now focused on Marti, not the illness or the uncertainty of their mom's first round of chemo, as Marti enjoyed the attention and relaxed in her lap. They asked me a lot of questions about The Good Dog Foundation (GDF) and how they could arrange for dog team visits. I immediately knew Marti and I were embarking on something good for all of us.

My patient arrived and Marti played with him for about an hour. She hung out with him every Tuesday for the next several weeks. He arrived for his treatments, and visits with Marti, early every single time. At the end of his course of treatment, he tearfully thanked me for bringing Marti each week. He confessed that he was one of the patients who had almost given up and was not regularly attending his treatments. Signing up for the therapy dog study was almost a last ditch effort before giving in to his illness. He told me he was making an effort to eat better and to fight the cancer, and proudly stated that had actually put on some weight. He was even making plans that once he was strong enough, he was going to the pound to get a dog. That experience kept us volunteering.

Our next assignment was at the Alzheimer's center in a Senior Citizen living facility on the Upper West Side in New York City. I walked into the room where several women, in various stages of the disease, sat quietly as the nurse tried to engage them. One woman in particular tried to talk with me. She was completely incoherent. The nurse explained that before getting sick, the woman had a dog and maybe she was trying to tell me about that. I spoke with her for a bit. She

made noises, and I tried to respond as if it were a typical conversation. Then she lightly tapped on the edge of her seat. To Marti this was an invitation, which she eagerly accepted, and I helped her into the woman's lap. Within just a few gentle strokes on Marti's back, the woman said to me as clear as could be, "What a beautiful dog." I was in shock. I turned to the nurse, who just smiled and said, "That's Alzheimer's and that's why you're here." We continued our visits there for several months and Marti enjoyed the attention as much as the patients did.

The Good Dog Foundation is a non-profit organization, started in 1998 with three volunteer teams and one facility. Prior to 1998, it was illegal for therapy dogs to enter medical facilities in New York. Rachel McPherson, the Founder and Executive Director of GDF, fought to change that. There are now more than 1,000 volunteer teams visiting patients and students in over 250 facilities in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts. GDF sets the standard for training therapy dog teams, and pioneered the concept of institutional coordination of therapy team activities.

I've enjoyed the rewards of volunteering with Marti as much as the people we visit. Marti is a natural therapy dog. She taught me the true impact that one 11-pound fur ball with bushy eyebrows could have on a person. She made me realize that it's possible to love another pet without ever forgetting the one who passed and in fact, that something good can come from every tragedy. Her good nature makes it possible to share the amazing gift my family gave me with others who, for just an hour or so, can put their personal difficulties behind them and experience the unconditional love of an animal.

To become a Good Dog Team, the dog must be at least four months old, and the handler needs only to have a desire and availability for volunteering with one or more GDF programs. You can visit www.thegooddogfoundation.org for more information and to learn about how you and your dog can volunteer. **FIT**