

Jack's Story



As I brought out one annoying puppy after another to meet Maddie in the humane society yard, Jack was the only one she would tolerate. Maddie is my first dog and the one responsible for showing Jack the basics of how to be a good dog. While at Washington University in St. Louis, studying for a master's degree in social work, I decided that Maddie needed a friend, a dog of her own. Of course, I also wanted a young dog who I could train to assist me in my future career as a clinical social worker, but as usual, I put Maddie's needs ahead of my own. Luckily, it turned out that we both grew smitten with Jack, a five month-old golden retriever mix whose previous caregivers had, as the card on his cage said, given him up because of "family problems."

At 50 pounds, Jack was already a large dog when I adopted him. Although I did not get to experience him as a small furball with puppy breath, he was very much a gentle Raggedy-Andy-type dog from the moment we met. The way he just flopped and folded his big self into my lap melted my heart. I knew that he was too sweet not to share. And thus, his schooling began.

My family likes to joke that since Jack was in graduate school with me, he is a super-smart dog. Despite his "ped-degree" (or lack thereof), Jack received home schooling from me in his first year, then graduated from obedience school and earned his AKC Canine Good Citizen certificate.



While I was still in school, Jack's first assignment was to help me present to my Treatment Evaluation course how animal-assisted therapy could be effective with troubled youth. I was nervous as I snuck Jack (as best as I could sneak an 80-pound dog) up through the back stairwell to my class. I felt that this presentation could make or break my career plans. I had read countless articles on the topic of animal-assisted therapy, examined the techniques, analyzed statistics, and concluded that, yes, this is an effective intervention. Now, the only trick was to show how it works. I worried, Would Jack do his job? Had I trained him well enough? Would my professor think this idea was too far-fetched and deem me unworthy of a degree? In spite of my fretting, Jack and I demonstrated in a role-play, with a classmate playing an apathetic, ego-injured kid, that a dog's warm acceptance does help to foster openness in a therapeutic relationship.



After that presentation, which seemed to pique the interest and support of most of the class, I felt that I received the o.k. to pursue my ambition. In my subsequent internships, I aimed to cross bureaucratic red tape and talk old-school professionals into allowing me to bring Jack to work so that I could further

prove that animal-assisted therapy could be a useful tool for mental health treatment. Despite photos of my friendly, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly Retriever, my ideas were rejected, albeit diplomatically: "It's a good idea but our board/directors/insurance will not approve it." Finally, after graduating and researching several therapy dog organizations, I decided that the Delta Society Pet Partner program

would be the most appropriate for getting Jack the certification of which he was worthy, and the legitimacy I needed to make him my bona fide partner.

A year and a half ago, Jack and I took the Pet Partners Course, and Jack passed the Skills and Aptitude Screening. Today, Jack and I work on the school-based therapy team at the Community Reach Center, a mental health center in Adams County. Our assigned school is North Star Elementary, where Jack is undoubtedly the most greeted and best recognized individual in the school. In our work as a Pet Partner team, Jack seems to provide the unconditional positive regard and serene presence needed to ease a child into expressing difficult emotions or talking about sensitive issues. In this profession, Jack and I are privy to children's experiences of anger, frustration, rejection, abuse or neglect. Some children, with their mistrust of adults, can be sure that only Jack passes no judgment. Perhaps the "family problems" from whence Jack came may help him to show love to kids whose current circumstances are troublesome.



Sometimes, Jack will serve as the blank slate on which a young client can project, then safely explore, his own feelings. Other times, Jack will help to build a child's self-esteem by patiently listening and responding to her direction to sit or stay. Often, he will help teach a child about responsibility and compassion. Whether Jack is a passive or active partner in providing therapy, he is always "present," ready to be pet by a child in need of physical comfort or to be enlisted to liven a somber mood. He serves double duty when he comforts me after stressful, emotion-laden appointments.



In my personal search for fulfillment and life meaning, I know that my job needs to meet only two main requirements: one, I must feel that what I'm doing makes a difference, and two, I must do it with or on behalf of animals. For sure, Jack helps me to achieve both of those goals. Remarkably and with gracious spirit, Jack does his job without complaint and relatively few requests- amounting to a few biscuits from the stashes kept by the office staff and the librarian.

Jack is seemingly a paradox - 100 pounds of gentle giant. He does his job peacefully and enthusiastically. Perpetually a child himself, Jack seems to exude the tolerant, innocent and fun-loving energy all children have inherent within them.

What stands out in my mind when I see Jack at work is that he is not trying to do anything extraordinary, he simply *is*. Ironically, the lesson Jack teaches to many children (and some adults too) is that truth, peace, and simple happiness are not complicated achievements; they are products of an open heart, a gentle touch...a big dog's smile.



Editor's Note: *The picture above so poignantly exemplifies the trust, acceptance and unconditional love that fuels the human-animal bond. Without insightful and compassionate people like you, Jamie, the dog that was once in a humane society shelter facing an unknown and perhaps tragic future, would never be the Jack of today. Likewise, without the non-judgmental partner and soft dog like Jack, you Jamie, would not be the wonderfully unique and effective counselor of today. I've seen how the children at North Star squeal with delight when they see Jack and you in the hallway and how they unreservedly display clear love and affection when interacting directly with Jack. What you do truly embodies Denver Pet Partner's mission of enhancing people's lives and promoting the human-animal bond, but perhaps even more touching is that you enable troubled children to fall asleep at night knowing that they are truly loved and accepted just as they are.*