

## *Sara and Zeke's Story*



My story with Zeke begins when my husband, Dave, and I decided we wanted an addition to our family in the form of a dog. We wanted to rescue a dog from a shelter so we created a list of what we were looking for (as well as what we didn't want) in our companion. I think we went to each shelter in the Denver area at least twice. On each visit (if it were up to me) I would've brought a dog home. "Stick to the list" Dave kept saying and I'm so glad we did! After meeting Zeke it took just seconds for both of us to realize that he was the dog for which we'd been searching and waiting for.

Little did we know at the time that the qualities we sought would make for a great animal-assisted therapy dog. After we bonded with Zeke and he settled in to our home and after watching him interact with our neighbor's children I knew he was

destined to be more than just our pet. I needed to share this special guy with others so I started doing research on animal-assisted therapy.

We became a team in April 2008 and the first facility we visited was The Gathering Place (a day shelter for woman and children experiencing poverty or homelessness). The visiting structure is such that we sat in the corner of their lounge area and let woman approach us. When I started I was nervous that people wouldn't come to us but as all teams know, it doesn't take long for people to approach our animals.



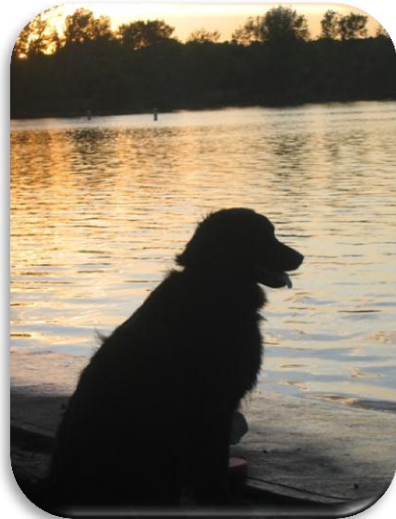
I met the most amazing women at the shelter and heard some pretty incredible stories. There was laughter and there were tears. I felt humbled that these women – complete strangers – were willing to open up to me (really to Zeke) and share their stories. Zeke definitely had a few girlfriends that came to see us week after week. I remember one particular woman spotted us from across the room and her face just lit up with a huge smile and she threw her hands in the air as she yelled Zeke's name. She then ran over and gave him a big hug. I think the consistency of our visits was a nice break from the uncertainty in the rest of their lives. One thing I kept hearing over and over was that one of the first things they were going to do when they got back on their feet was to get a pet again. They know, as we all do, that pets are an integral part of our lives.

Knowing how great Zeke is with children I decided to visit The Bridge Project (an after school program). Initially I was told I was going to be paired with a young boy however on our first day

that boy wasn't there so a nine year old girl was asked if she wanted to spend time with us. We had a great hour together and at the end she asked if we were her new tutors. I told her I didn't think so but asked if she wanted us to be to which she exclaimed "yes!" I got a call later that week asking if we would mind being paired up with the nine year old girl. Apparently her pleading worked! We had a fun semester together in which we focused on her reading. I could tell she looked forward to our visits by the drawings she'd bring to our sessions (while often "forgetting" her homework). The pictures were always for Zeke and she would write things like "I love Zeke" on them. Even though she'd forget her homework we always focused on her reading and I watched her confidence grow and her reading skills improve throughout the semester.

After the semester was over I re-evaluated what I thought would be the best facility for Zeke and we joined the team at The Medical Center of Aurora, South campus. We immediately fell in love with the staff and Zeke really enjoys his rounds. I've had patients tell me that they feel better as they're petting Zeke and others don't have to say anything at all - I can see it in their faces. Patients aren't the only ones that benefit from a visit from Zeke. One time there were a couple of kids in the hallway who were there to see their grandpa. They patiently waited in the hallway as I made my way down the hall, room by room. When I reached them the girl gingerly asked if she could pet Zeke. She ended up spending about 20 minutes petting Zeke and kept saying over and over how happy she was. On a recent visit, I asked to enter a room and as I was making my way to the patient's bed the Nurse's Assistant told the patient that his oxygen levels changed as soon as he laid eyes on Zeke. Hearing about a tangible impact Zeke made was pretty spectacular.

It's not just moments like these that make what we do so special. When asked to write our story I was asked specifically to share how my work with Zeke has impacted someone's life. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention how this work has impacted MY life. The work we do has impacted my life in ways I never imagined. The stories that I get to hear are just amazing.



When I leave the room the patients and their visitors always thank me for what we do and tell me how great they think animal-assisted therapy is. But really, I feel like I should be the one thanking them for allowing us into their lives.

I also never imagined how much deeper my bond could grow with Zeke. I joke that Zeke liked my husband and me equally before we became a team and now I think he's slightly more partial to me!

I feel very lucky to be a part of such a great organization. The people (both staff and volunteers) that I work with at American Humane Association Animal-Assisted Therapy are truly unsung heroes and unmatched in their capacity to give of themselves. I

feel very humbled to be chosen as the July 2011 Team of the Month and I certainly couldn't do what I do without the love and support of my friends and family and especially Dave who helps in the "prep" work of bathing, grooming and walking Zeke. And of course, I couldn't do this without Zeke - my hero!