

Susan and Bentley's Story



It's an honor to be acknowledged by the American Humane Association. Bentley and I have been a part of this organization since 2006 and have volunteered at Life Care Center of Littleton the entire time. We look forward to visiting the residents each week.

In 2006, after 1-1/2 years of healing from the loss of our first Golden Retriever, we decided to bring the joy and companionship of a puppy back into our lives. My husband decided he wanted to start with a puppy rather than an older dog, so we connected with a breeder in Wellington, Colorado. Out of ten puppies, it was so hard not to want to take "Navy Blue" (his identification color) home with us immediately when we selected (or did

he select us?) him. Our little fur ball came home with us at 8 weeks and a whopping 13 lbs! He did not like his hard shell crate the first night and in the wee hours we were up building his larger wire crate to ease his adjustments to our new home. After that, he adjusted quickly.

Although we lived in Seattle at one point, Delta Society was not on my radar. It wasn't until we moved to Denver and we'd had Bentley four years that I read more about pet therapy and got involved with Denver Pet Partners, now American Humane Association. In March, 2006 I attended the workshop and two weeks later took Bentley for evaluation. We did not pass. Diana and the evaluators were supportive and gave us tips (and a harness!) to assist us. Though disappointed, we kept up the training and passed on our next try.

Next we went on to shadow at Life Care Center of Littleton and eventually going solo doing AAA. Bentley would prance in all excited and it would take a couple of visits before he would calm down, but he enjoyed seeing everyone and getting all the attention. It wasn't long before we could walk in and he knew to calm down—although the tail still wags and he looks like he's grinning. He loves the rougher handling from some of the men and will lean into their wheelchairs to let them know he likes it. But he also likes the soft touch of the women—especially one who gives dog treats. No matter what direction we're coming from, Bentley always knows her room! Usually she will rough up the hair on top of Bentley's head and just laugh at his "bed head" look. And there are times when she'll gently take his head in her lap and bend over him for a long, quiet snuggle.

Another resident would start a slow heh-heh-heh chuckle that grew louder and louder when he saw Bentley. He always asked if Bentley drove over in his car. I'd tell him Bentley was the

navigator with his head resting on my shoulder. After a bout with illness and no laughter, he spotted us coming down the hall and started up his heh-heh-heh. One of the management staff noticed and said, "I haven't heard you laugh like that in a long time." The human-animal bond was still there.

While most of the clients at Life Care are elderly, we did have an opportunity to visit with a 23-year old rehab patient. An aide asked if I would take Bentley to see him as he was very sad being there. So we knocked on his door, slowly opened it to see him resting in his bed, and asked if he would like a visit. His face went from sadness to one of joy at seeing Bentley. It was clear he had multiple broken bones and couldn't move easily. Since he couldn't comfortably reach Bentley, I gently raised Bentley's front paws on his bed where he could stroke and see him. Bentley quietly stayed there while the young man was able to focus on something other than his pain. I noticed a wheelchair in the corner and asked if he was able to use it. He said he was just starting to learn. I told him that we would return in a week and that we would be glad to go for a walk. When we returned a week later, his door was open, and he was sitting in the doorway in his wheelchair waiting for us with a smile. Off we went around the complex with lots of staff acknowledging he was out of his room.



After visiting with residents for two years, we were asked if we would consider AAT work in the Physical Therapy department at Life Care. Of course! Now we alternate weeks between visiting residents and working in PT. Bentley gets lots of brushing, massages and retrieving toys. If a patient resists coming to physical therapy the therapists will mention that a dog is involved and that's all they need for motivation. All of the pets provide that little extra spark needed to continue working hard or just to take the first few steps. Therapists who have never owned animals see the extra effort patients will make just because of the animals. Therapists often say the client has walked farther than before. The clients don't realize that just rolling the sticky paper over their knees down the shin to collect dog hair is therapy. Even squeezing water from a

bottle into a bowl for the dog to drink from strengthens their hands. And just having that soft fur to massage and loving eyes to look at is healing. Our pets provide the motivating force to turn the client's pain and monotony of exercise into something they look forward to accomplishing.

Over the years we have seen several residents come into the Life Care facility as well as depart. Bentley and I have been honored to be at bedsides during final days. One day we walked up to a room with people milling around the doorway. I could see the family resemblance and realized their loved one had just passed. This was a resident whose husband we had first visited with at Life Care four years earlier and now we had been visiting with her during her illness. The daughter sought out contact with Bentley as her mother's life ended. I knew her mother had loved dogs and had had a Golden. A few days later we attended her funeral where she included her dog's collar among family photos. We quietly sat in back and no one knew we were there until the end when Bentley stood up and shook. The service ended. The daughter eventually found us and thanked us for coming saying it was perfect that we had been there. We have attended several funerals since then, always welcomed.

While it's a pleasure to see the delighted reactions from the staff and residents, I receive even more joy. Bentley stays in the moment whether it's just being quietly stroked or chasing after a toy in therapy. He's been a blessing to many, but especially to me. I get to see the benefits of hearing someone talk to my dog when he will only communicate in hand gestures to humans. I see clients introduce Bentley to their roommate or visitors when they normally don't want to socialize. It's a joy to see the residents visibly relax when Bentley rests his head on their arm or knee. I have been blessed to have this opportunity to serve others in expanding the human-animal bond and am thankful to Diana, Amy, Meagan and the multitude of others who continue to make American Humane Association grow and positively influence others' lives.

