



## *Mary Hencmann and Oscar*



I can't remember a time when there wasn't a dog in my life. They were always there, by my side, quietly providing love and support in so many ways. However, I never imagined that working as part of a Pet Partner Therapy team could bring that love and support to others and so much joy to me!

The idea of training a therapy dog came from my dad a long time ago. Our dogs were best buddies who trained and played together. His Lab mix went with him to a senior center to volunteer. My dad was so taken by the impact these

short visits had on the residents that he suggested I investigate doing something similar. That idea got put on the back burner for some time... until I adopted Oscar.

I met Oscar at a local shelter. He was 5 months old and just arrived from New Mexico. He was a small frightened puppy sitting in the back of a very large kennel. I fell in love with him immediately and soon determined he'd be a great "therapy" dog! I searched the internet looking for options in the area and came across Denver Pet Partners. It seemed like a perfect fit for us and the training began! Oscar was a quick learner, loved people and enjoyed the attention. He moved quickly from basic training techniques to passing the pet partner evaluation on the first try!

We joined Denver Pet Partners eight years ago. I was working full time for a non-profit serving abused and neglected children and families. It was a stressful job and at times Oscar came with me to hang out with the kids. They loved hugging him, reading to him, taking him for walks or sometimes just sitting with him. I read an article about dogs helping kids prepare for court testimony and hoped this would be something Oscar and I could do for the kids at the Children's Center. That didn't happen for us, but we spent our time volunteering at a lot of different places - libraries, schools, and many different one-time special events. One of Oscar's favorite places to volunteer was the "stress relief" events at local universities. We delighted in listening to students share special stories of their own pets at home, while absent-mindedly petting Oscar's fluffy, soft fur. "I miss my family, but I miss my dog more" was a usual comment from many of the students who came to see us.

I decided that I wanted to spend more time volunteering with Oscar, so we looked for additional opportunities. Our first regular assignment was at Rose Hospital where we volunteered weekly. After saying hello to the hospital staff (who enjoyed our visits as much as the patients) off we'd go to visit patients and their families in their rooms. Some were so excited to have a break in their day, they would readily reach over to pet and chat with Oscar, while others were a bit hesitant because of his large size. He'd sit patiently resting his head on the side of their bed and eventually his gentle nature would win them over and they would pet him. Oscar had a knack for knowing who needed him the most and, sometimes, it wasn't the patient, but a family member. I always marveled at how sensitive he was to their different needs! One time a young woman approached us in the hall and asked if we could stop by and see her dad. We entered the room filled with family members. Oscar and I went over to see her father briefly and then he moved towards a young girl sitting by herself and sat by her side. His quiet presence was just the distraction she needed to cope.

We switched gears a few years later and spent our time tutoring a young student at the Bridge Project. His teacher felt he needed an extra incentive to attend to the after-school program. It turned out he loved dogs, so he and Oscar were a perfect match! There weren't many dogs at the school, so he felt very special having a dog come and visit just him at the program. He'd introduce Oscar to the other kids and teach them how to gently approach and pet him. We'd spend the first part of our time together working on his homework assignments and, once successfully completed, off we'd go for walks and talks around the neighborhood! The after-school program and our weekly visits were now something he looked forward to!



In 2017, for health reasons, I semi-retired Oscar. He continued working special events and would regularly join me at work spending time with the staff and university students. Oscar's always smiling face and playful prance makes him approachable wherever he goes! My dad was right! The idea he suggested so long

*DPP Team of the Month (January 2020)*

DENVER PET PARTNERS



ago proved to be a good one. Oscar and I have loved being part of the Denver Pet Partners and the wonderful opportunities they have provided.

