



## *Elissa Bernstein and Merle*



I always knew I wanted to have a therapy dog! When my father was in hospice care at the hospital, I wanted him to have the company of his beloved pet. I asked the hospital and was given permission to do so. I brought Sylvester to see my father and you could immediately see the change in my father's mood. This was 28 years ago when therapy animal teams were not really popular. At this moment in time, I recognized the human animal connection and how beneficial it was. From this time forward, my goal was to have a therapy dog. Unfortunately, my job did not allow me to have a dog, since I traveled every week and lived alone, so I kept this goal in the back of my mind as a future reality.

I read an article approximately 20 years ago about a breed of dog called a 'Berger Picard'. After reading the description about this breed I knew immediately this was the dog for me! Finding a breeder was another challenge, as there are only 250 of these dogs in the United States. I started talking to a breeder a good 5 years before I was in the position to get one. When I was finally ready, I brought Amelie home. Unfortunately, she did not have the temperament for therapy work, but she was perfect for me to bring to the nursing facility where my mother lived for 4 years before her passing. Amelie and I made the rounds to all wings of the nursing facility, and she knew different tricks to do for different patients--she was a star! She was uncomfortable with people rushing up to her however and would bark.



I was still determined to get my therapy dog and patiently waited for my breeder to let me know when she would have another litter. I waited for 3-years for this particular breeding and she hand-picked Merle for me. Merle was the one who always wanted to sit with you, cuddle and be close. She knew he was the one who would be perfect for the job of being a therapy dog with me.

Merle will be 5 at the end of September. We have been a registered Pet Partner team since 2018 and have visited at Swedish Hospital, many College distress events, hospice, Columbine Memorial and Jeffcom. One encounter that I will never

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DENVER PET PARTNERS



forget was with a Columbine survivor who sat with Merle and I at the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event. This lady just hugged Merle and he in turn put his head on her shoulder and hugged her back for several minutes. Merle really loves to visit the staff at Swedish and in my opinion, they need the most support of almost anyone.

Oh, and by the way, my breeder told me that he would not embarrass me if I wanted to show Merle. I have never shown a dog or knew what showing dogs entailed, but we decided to try that too! Merle is now a Grand Champion! I am so lucky to have Merle and words cannot describe how much we love him! I hope he will be a Pet Partner therapy team for many years to come!

