



Melanie Stopponi and Kuzco



Kuzco is a dog with a purpose! He has been an inspiration to our family from the moment he arrived. The name Kuzco comes from the Disney movie “The Emperor’s New Groove.” If you are not familiar with the Disney movie, the prince is turned into a llama to learn humility. This name fits Kuzco perfectly! As a young puppy Kuzco wanted to rule the world. With consistency and love, Kuzco has learned to be a gentle giant.

Kuzco’s life started with Canine Companions in the puppy program. Kuzco was named by the Breeder and arrived in Colorado in 2014. After raising in Colorado, he attended advanced training in Oceanside, California. But life as a service dog was not Kuzco’s style.



Colorado Is Where I’ll Be

by Kuzco

There are no guarantees
That I would be a service dog, you see
They said “release” and I am free

College was not for me
There was too much anxiety
I leave without a degree

I lived by the sea
There were not enough trees
I’d rather play in the snow, you see

Colorado is where I’ll be
Home with Michael and Melanie
It will be just us three!

As the Puppy Raisers, we adopt Kuzco! With the whole world before him, Kuzco decided he wanted to visit assisted living and nursing care facilities. Kuzco has always been drawn to the elderly. His passion for the elderly exceeds his love for the younger generations.

We started visiting nursing homes when Kuzco was a puppy. My aunt moved to a nursing home shortly after her Lewy Bodies Disease diagnosis. Little did I know Aunt Susan would start us on an amazing journey visiting assisted living and nursing care facilities. We visited the nursing home every day. Kuzco was a daily dose of love for the residents.



While Kuzco had many accomplishments visiting people, there is one memory that always makes me smile. Kuzco would place himself between two recliners. He would lean to the left receiving gentle pats on the top of his head. He would then lean to the right, and receive more pats on the top of his head. He would do this back-and-forth between whoever was sitting in the recliners. When the residents saw Kuzco, they all wanted to sit in the recliners.

A friend mentioned her mom moved to a nursing home too. Kuzco and I started to visit Shirley. Little did I know, Shirley would become one of Kuzco's very favorite people. Kuzco would prance into the building to see Shirley. On our last visit to Shirley, Kuzco did not want to leave Shirley's side. When we were leaving Kuzco looked back and paused. It was at that moment, I knew it was the last time Kuzco would see Shirley.

Kuzco in 2017, officially became a registered therapy dog with Denver Pet Partners. While his visitations with various people continued, he was welcomed as representing an organization with high standards.



When Steve was transferred to a new nursing care facility, we met with the staff to introduce Kuzco, describing his role when visiting Steve. The physical therapist immediately incorporated Kuzco's visits into the physical therapy plan. Kuzco's new visit was to wait, at the end of the room, for Steve to walk towards Kuzco. Of course, as Steve approached, Kuzco's tail would wag with delight. Once seated, Steve's reward was petting Kuzco. If we could only hear Kuzco encouraging Steve to walk. Because Kuzco and Steve had a very special bond.



Another resident in the same care facility, Stan, refused to leave his room. The physical therapist asked if Kuzco could walk alongside him. Our team role was to wait outside of the room and then slowly stroll the hallways with Stan. Kuzco always looked forward to these walks. On the days Team Kuzco was to visit, Stan progressed to waiting in the lobby for us to arrive. Stan also started responding to his family. Kuzco was named a hero by Stan's family.

COVID restrictions have been especially difficult for Kuzco. Because of the early news reports, I discontinued our visits to the assisted living and the nursing care facilities. As more COVID restrictions were enacted, Kuzco's outings decreased dramatically. During his daily walks, Kuzco wanted to visit with people. He would try to lead me towards the older generation. Everyone we met followed the COVID guidelines, Kuzco did not understand why people were avoiding contact with him. Many times, I could see the hurt in Kuzco's eyes.

DPP Team of the Month (July 2021)



Our visitations to the assisted living and nursing care facilities have not resumed. With the current outbreak of the Delta variant, future visitations are unknown at this time. However, Kuzco takes every opportunity to keep up with his skills. Recently at Aspen Grove, he saw ladies walking towards us. Kuzco immediately positioned himself directly in their path and sat down and waited for them to approach. Who can resist Kuzco's charm with the ladies?



Kuzco's strengths include compassion, intuition, and love. But, his greatest strength is persistence. It is with persistence, his compassion, intuition, and love, are enhanced in Kuzco's actions and behaviors. He is teaching us to lead life to the fullest and focus on the people in front of you. Even if you have to sit in their path to get their attention.

