

## *Megan Beren and Benji*



Benji is a six-year-old Cardigan Welsh Corgi. November is his birthday month, and he will be turning seven this year! Benji and I have been a Pet Partners team since 2019. It has brought a great deal of joy into so many lives, including Benji's and mine.

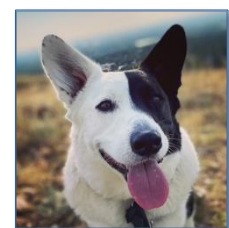
Benji was my mom's dog. He came from a breeder in North Dakota. My mom loved corgis. She had watched my sister with her own corgi, who was a trained service dog, and knew that she wanted to experience the joy of such a fun-loving, playful breed.

Benji spent his puppyhood living with my mom. Benji was an intelligent, mischievous ball of energy! As a puppy, he could often be found opening kitchen cabinets to find, and shred, rolls of paper towels. He also liked to chew everything, and my mom created an elaborate system of baby gates to protect her furniture.



Benji has a very friendly and social personality. I have often said that, "Benji has never met a stranger." He enjoys socializing with humans as much as other dogs. Throughout his puppyhood and adolescence, Benji often could be found with my daughter and her friends. He loved running around the backyard, sitting on laps, and rolling around on the floor, eagerly bringing his toys to be included in whatever game was taking place. My mother often remarked that Benji would make a wonderful therapy dog.

When Benji was a few years old, I became interested in Pet Partners. As I read about the tremendous joy therapy animals bring to people, I felt a strong desire to be part of it. I decided to work with Benji towards becoming a therapy team. I asked Benji's dog trainer for guidance and developed a routine. It was something of a challenge at first. Benji and I spent many mornings walking around the shops at Aspen Grove, many of which welcome dogs. When I began to introduce basic skills in these



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settings, Benji barked (loudly!) at me out of frustration. I persisted, and slowly Benji and I became a pair. As the months progressed, Benji and I developed a very strong connection. The time we spent relaxing on the couch, playing outside, and going on walks felt equally important to the various training exercises we did together.



In early 2019, I felt Benji and I both were ready for the next step with Pet Partners. I signed up for, and attended, the Handler Workshop. In the spring, my mom's health began to decline. Benji transitioned to living full-time with my daughter and me. One of the happiest memories from this time was on May 18. This was the day that Benji and I passed our evaluation! We were so eager to get started!

My mom passed away in June of 2019. I was so grateful for Benji during this difficult time. Our walks together brought me solace, and his still mischievous behavior brought a smile to my face.

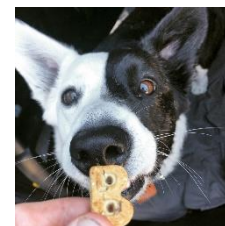
In January of 2020, Benji began his work as a therapy dog at Carson Elementary. He quickly became the most popular guy at school! We met weekly with two small groups of children hand-selected by the school psychologist. Our activities focused on helping foster social-emotional connections. The children also looked forward to having a turn to do something helpful for Benji, such as fill his water dish.

Benji was always eager for his special days at school. He recognized the neighborhood as we approached in the car and would chatter quietly as I pulled into a parking spot, eager to go see his friends. In addition to these two small groups, Benji was requested at times by children having a difficult day at school. He brought a smile to every face he passed as he walked down the hall.



Our time there that school year was brief. Schools closed as the pandemic hit. We were on hiatus for the next 18 months.

Benji's work at Carson was able to resume for the 2021-2022 school year. He quickly returned to his position as the most popular guy in school! He was eager to be back. This time he worked in the deaf and hard of hearing classroom, which was a very special experience. The children quickly bonded with Benji and knew that Tuesday afternoon was the special day that Benji would be visiting their classroom. Each visit began with the children asking in sign language if they could pet my dog. I enjoyed learning a small amount of sign language from them, and they were very enthusiastic to learn Benji's special hand signals, which are like his own type of sign language. Each visit





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concluded with one child helping me to walk Benji to the door of the school with a special leash I attached for them.



Benji and I re-evaluated with Pet Partners in the spring and this time passed with a complex rating. We were excited to return to Carson again this school year. Unfortunately, we are once again on hiatus. I was recently diagnosed with breast cancer. I am grateful to have Benji by my side at home. He is a source of support and encouragement to me.

A little bit of fun information about Benji—Benji loves car rides. He is the perfect companion for trips to the mountains or long weekends in Santa Fe. He stretches out on the backseat, and the motion of the car usually puts him to sleep. Benji gets very excited about two things: the doorbell and dinnertime! His favorite toy is his “bouncy, bouncy ball,” and he is an enthusiastic squirrel-chaser. Benji is very eager

to make friends with cats, although that has not happened yet. Benji loves to unwrap gifts. Anything in his reach that is gift-wrapped probably won't be gift-wrapped for long! Finally, Benji always dresses up for Halloween! Last year he was Sherlock Holmes and the previous year, Harry Potter.

