

Micki DeMaria and Estes



The idea of becoming a therapy team came to me many years ago after seeing therapy teams at work in my community. Once I saw the love, joy and hope they brought to the public, I was immediately hooked. However, at the time I was busy in the throes of graduate school and beginning a demanding legal career, and so I placed this dream on hold. Luckily for me, this dream would become a reality over twenty years later. During those years, I parented a few fur babies, enrolled in various training classes, and learned about responsibly raising canines, all with the thought in the back of my mind that someday, I would be lucky enough to become a therapy team.

In the fall of 2014, the universe started to align when I read a book on raising service dogs. It was a beautiful story and sparked my deep desire of raising and partnering with a dog as a therapy team. My life was beginning to transition to where I was going to have extra time and I knew it was time to get going on my Therapy Team Dream. Not long after, I found a truly remarkable and responsible breeder who had great knowledge of the characteristics of therapy dogs. I began to visit with her and spend time with many of her pups. Things began moving quickly from that point in the best of ways when I learned that her beautiful female Star had a litter on the way. However, all the pups were spoken for unless there was an unexpected extra puppy born. As it turned out, there was

magic in the air that Christmas Eve.

There was an extra puppy in the litter, and our sweet Estes was born - the best gift ever! Estes and I bonded

immediately. We have an understanding of each other that is extremely special, one that I have never felt with another pet. I always say he is a mini version of me – the better parts of course! He came permanently to our home eight weeks later and our training commenced.



As Estes was growing up, our breeder connected me with other folks who were involved with therapy work. To learn as much as I could, I did informational interviews and tried to soak up as much knowledge as possible from these individuals. I also continued my research on therapy work and went through training programs with Estes, and also separately as his handler. Estes has always been quick to learn, and very willing to please and perform, but he was also quite a spirited pup.

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One day when I was grocery shopping at my local Denver Whole Foods, I saw a sign that they partnered with non-profits to raise funds, and one of those non-profits was Denver Pet Partners. The name caught my attention, and I quickly began researching what Denver Pet Partners was all about and what the requirements were to become a therapy team. I felt instantly connected to this company - it felt like a great match for us! I wanted to get involved right away, and so Estes and I completed an additional therapy team workshop. Upon completion, I felt we were ready to be evaluated. Sure enough, our persistence, consistency and love of working with one another paid off. We were on our way, and I could see my long-time dream coming true.



In October of 2019, we officially became a therapy team with Denver Pet Partners. We began doing AAI visits at special events. Some of our favorite events that year were visiting with students during finals at Arapahoe Community College and Johnson & Wales. Prior to the pandemic, we enjoyed doing an AAI wellness visit at Buckley Air Force. Once Covid hit, we were only able to do a couple of visits, but these visits were very rewarding. We completed an outdoor wellness visit with Yes! Communities. This community loved taking a break on a beautiful and sunny Colorado day, visiting and lounging on a blanket with Estes.

One of my absolute favorite visits to-date was going to Morning Star Boulder and partaking in an outdoor dog parade. After the parade, we were able to do one-on-one outdoor visits with some of the residents at the community. Oh, the smiles Estes received and the loving pets were phenomenal! It was amazing to see these isolated individuals come alive with sparkling eyes as they watched Estes interact and lovingly nuzzle their hands. We've also enjoyed doing visits at Golden Peaks Recovery, and Adams County Human Services.



In the fall of 2022, Estes and I were matched with a regular AAI wellness gig. We still enjoy the occasional special event AAI visit and attended our biggest event yet this past year at JADPRO LIVE

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where Estes interacted with approximately 80 individuals. However, now Estes has also become a regular favorite at the Denver Medical Examiner's Office.



Over the past year, we have been doing monthly visits at the Denver Medical Examiner's Office and enjoying every minute of it. This is a high-stress work environment and Estes has become a very welcomed sight. Many times, during our visits, the employees will flock around him to watch him do tricks and to give him treats. They love the one-on-one visits in their individual offices where they get to interact with him with handshakes, a little light play of catch, watch to see what stuffy he may be carrying that day to encourage some hellos and interaction, get a special hug, nuzzle or, if asked for, a tiny kiss. It is a rare occasion that he isn't visiting with 15, 20 or more employees each month and bringing smiles, breaks from the stress, love, or laughs their way.

Although it has been a couple of years and some hours of AAI have been completed, these rewarding visits are just what we hope to be the start of our adventure as a therapy team. We continually look forward to seeing what next event may be a match for us, and how we can continue bringing the joy of the human-animal bond to others. Keep an eye out for us. You may see us at the different events, or at agility class, on the trails, or swimming in mountain lakes. And, if you see a white dog rolling in the snow who resembles a polar bear making snow angels there's a good chance it's Estes!

