

Michelle Crawford and Riggs



It's 1994 in the rehab unit of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Wearing a long, white lab coat and sporting a name tag that reads Lung Transplant Coordinator, I enter the room of Allison, one of our post-lung transplant patients and stop dead in my tracks. A HUGE Newfoundland dog is laying on her bed and Allison is nowhere to be seen. What the...?!

Just then her head pops up on the other side of the massive dog. She's wearing the biggest smile and is giggling herself silly buried in the dog's thick fur. I've just been introduced to the field of Pet Therapy (as it was known back then). Even in 1994 Cedars-Sinai had a full time Pet Therapy Coordinator on staff. I knew at that time; this was what I would do when I retired.

Fast forward a few, (several?!), decades after the Newfoundland event, I found myself living in Colorado, newly retired, on 5 acres, with a husband that still traveled weekly. I had traveled as well for years, having moved on from ICU nursing and transplant coordination to a career in pharmaceutical clinical research. Up to this point, cats were my constant companions, but now we had the space, and I had the time for dogs. Conversations about this with my husband usually ended with him saying something like 'we don't need dogs'. And since we now have two, you know who eventually won that argument.

Having been raised with English Springer Spaniels I couldn't think of any other dog to have. In the summer of 2018, I reserved a pup from a breeder in Kansas City and set about waiting. Unfortunately, they called when the litter was born to say it was smaller than expected and I wasn't high enough on her list to get a puppy. But she was helping to place a litter from Idaho whose mother had been one of her pups and those were already 8 weeks of age and ready to go. Was I interested in those? So, I contacted that breeder who had two liver and white males - exactly what I was looking for.

With my husband out of town, nervous and excited, I booked a flight to Idaho Falls for the next morning. I put down the phone and instantly drove to PetSmart. I wasn't prepared for a new puppy; I had nothing to support its needs, not even a food bowl. I suddenly needed everything....immediately! The following day in MacKay, ID surrounded by a wiggling mass of 8-week-old Springer pups, the breeder steered me toward little Riggs as a possible good fit to be a therapy dog. I bundled him into his carrier, and we headed back to the airport. The journey had begun.

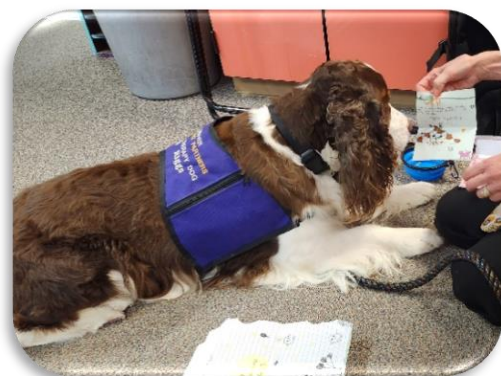


My husband was easily won over after seeing the chubby belly and big feet of puppy Riggs. So much so that about 6 months later, Keith said Riggs needed a 'buddy'. His idea, not mine! Enter Angus. We also have cats Charlie and Milo. I'm the Queen of my house and love all my boys dearly.



Being a high energy Springer puppy, I wasn't sure Riggs would make it as a therapy dog. It wasn't until he turned 3 years old that he settled down enough to consider moving forward. With my sister-in-law Kris (a dog trainer and owner of two Belgian Malinois search and rescue dogs) on speed dial, some Paw School classes, a few YouTube tutorials, and lots of practice, Riggs and I eventually became ready. He had grown into a beautiful boy with a wonderful, goofy, gentle personality who loves attention and never lets me out of his sight.

I scheduled our evaluation for early 2020, which was then canceled due to the pandemic. I rescheduled in March 2022, and we promptly failed as Riggs growled at the neutral dog. Not wanting to wait until DPP's next evaluation in August, I scheduled with a Pet Partners evaluator in Avon, CO for 3 weeks later. I redoubled my efforts to socialize Riggs with other dogs. My husband drove to the mountains with us, and we passed that evaluation with flying colors - Phew!



As part of the Dogs in the Classroom Program, we visit a 5th grade class at Vaughn Elementary School (<https://petsintheclassroom.org/dogs-in-the-classroom-educational-program/>) and are the Friday therapy team at Parker Adventist Hospital. We've also had a few Fridays at the UC Dental School of Medicine at Anschutz when not at the hospital.

Shortly after starting at the hospital, we were walking past a set of double doors when out came a woman dressed head to toe in OR garb. She took one look at Riggs and fell to her knees beside him. He immediately stopped and snuggled into her. She softly sobbed and whispered in Riggs' ear; 'how did you know I needed this?' After several minutes she looked up at me and smiled, "I've just had one of the worst days of my career. And here you are. I needed this so badly."

To say what we do is special is not doing justice to this profoundly rewarding work. I've been amazed at the effect Riggs has on those we encounter. Since that episode in 1994 I had wanted

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to do this type of volunteering because it 'looked fun'. Sometime during that first year after our evaluation, I realized just how impactful a simple visit with a therapy animal can be. It's been a privilege to share Riggs and be a part of Denver Pet Partners. I look forward to continuing this work for many years to come.

BTW – remember that Pet Therapy Coordinator at Cedars-Sinai? She became my good friend, was even my Maid of Honor, and now lives in the Denver area, too.

