

Paige Kraus and Kenai



The doors of the breeder’s kennels flew open and out bounded nearly a dozen fluffy Bernese Mountain Dog puppies! Oh, my goodness, such cuteness overload! How would we ever choose the puppy that was meant for us? Within minutes, one especially roly poly puppy waddled over to me. His big brown eyes lovingly gazed up at me, I picked him up and nuzzled into his cotton ball fur. There was no doubt this was the

puppy for us. Our unique bonded connection had begun. Now that our puppy had chosen us, we undertook the task of finding the perfect name for our newest family member. My husband and I had just celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary with a trip to the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska. There we learned that “kenai” translated to “black bear” in the Native American language. What a perfect name for our Berner puppy who looked just like a chubby black bear cub!



Within months of adopting Kenai, the global pandemic shut down our world. As an elementary school teacher, meeting with my students shifted from our cozy classroom to the cold virtual world. Each day I logged onto my computer to find the faces of my third graders eagerly awaiting their only connection with their teacher – and her Bernese Mountain Dog. Each day they asked, “Can we please see Kenai?” Of course, he was never far from me and always readily visible via the computer’s camera. Kenai quickly became a part of our online school routine, and I

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creatively integrated him into all our lessons. Math story problems and writing lessons always featured Kenai as the main character. I encouraged my students to bring their pets to our online lessons, so we had a multitude of dogs, cats, lizards, snakes, hedgehogs and birds attending at any given time. Due to the pandemic, these children were so isolated that they spent more time with their precious pets than they did with humans outside of their household. As I taught for an entire school year via my computer, I saw firsthand the joy that a connection with an animal could bring to these littlest victims of the pandemic.



As a Bernese Mountain Dog owner, I belong to several online groups of fellow Berner owners. One day, in the midst of the pandemic, I saw Laura Ackerman's post advertising a virtual informational session about therapy dogs hosted by Denver Pet Partners. The session explained the characteristics of the ideal therapy dog. As I listened, I realized that Kenai's personality, and the strong bond we had formed together, made us great candidates for a therapy team. While others were baking bread and watching YouTube videos during the pandemic, Kenai and I began our training. I took the Pet Partners online courses and he and I explored the trails near our Colorado Springs home, while practicing all the behaviors he needed to master to become a therapy dog. We proudly passed our first evaluation with DPP in August of 2021.

For the past two years, Kenai and I have spread his therapy dog joy in many ways. As a teacher, I have led many lessons on animal assisted therapy to groups of juveniles in residential mental health facilities, as well as students in elementary, middle school and college settings. Of course, these lessons are especially meaningful for students since they are actually experiencing the power of animal assisted therapy as they interact with Kenai throughout the lesson. We have provided support to hurting individuals in events



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Each time Kenai has an interaction with a person, they exclaim how wonderful it feels to be loved by him. Those big brown eyes that captured my heart at our very first meeting send messages of unconditional acceptance to everyone he meets. Being Kenai’s handler, and witnessing the healing effect he has upon hurting people, is one of the highlights of my life. We are so very grateful to Denver Pet Partners for the opportunity to serve so many people in our community as a therapy team. Kenai is just four years old, and we are looking forward to making a positive difference in our world for many more years to come.



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