

Diana Richett with Finn and Harold

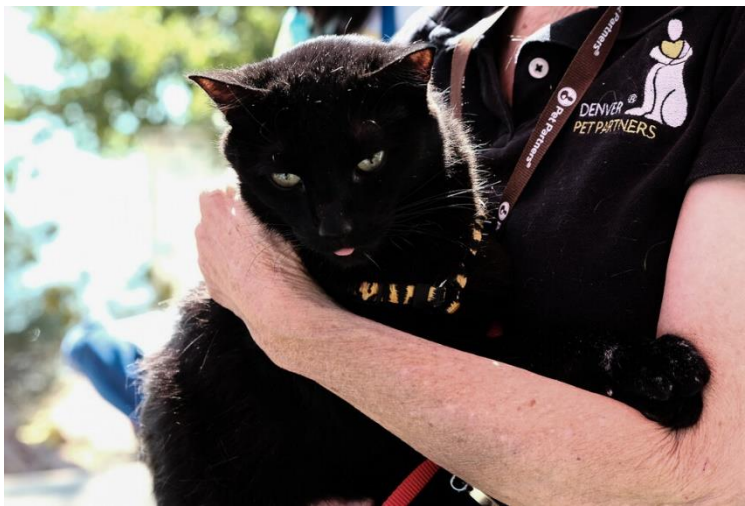


Harold, Finn and I are honored to be selected as the Denver Pet Partner teams of the month. I have always been passionate about children and animals, two vulnerable groups that Denver Pet Partners serves. I went to law school so I could be an effective advocate for children. I started my legal career as a Denver Public Defender in the juvenile division representing children charged with crimes. Many of the children I represented were children of color living in poverty. A number were children from fractured families who gravitated toward gangs and expressed little hope of surviving past their 18th birthday let alone graduating from high school. After years with the public defender system, I broadened my legal focus in private practice to serve as a guardian ad litem for dependent, neglected and abused children.

I have always loved and found comfort in animals and after over fifteen years of practice took a break from law to become a certified veterinary technician. While I never worked in this field, except in volunteering at animal shelters, and returned to practice law, my medical knowledge made it possible for me to adopt and care for animals with special needs, including senior cats with kidney issues,

diabetics, and cats with chronic respiratory issues. In 2002, I adopted my first hind leg paralyzed/incontinent cat. Simon was my first and most beloved pet partner. He was the one that led me to Denver Pet Partners.

Simon was born with severe spinal deformities; he had pectus excavatum or funnel chest as well as an abnormal curvature of the thoracic spine. His hind legs were paralyzed and he also was incontinent so I had to express his bladder several times a day. A few years later he was diagnosed with heart and pulmonary issues. He also had asthma which required daily medication.



As a child I knew intuitively that animals were a source of comfort, healing and hope. Later, I saw how children, especially those who are unable to trust, are more at ease with animals and more likely to risk a relationship with them because animals will not judge them or betray their confidences. At the time I adopted Simon, I was a

volunteer at an animal shelter and participated in its humane education program. Despite his physical limitations, Simon had such an outgoing, larger than life personality and was so good natured and friendly that I was allowed on occasion to bring him with me to schools and residential treatment centers. While the children would initially react to the “crippled” kitty with sighs of sadness, Simon, who knew how to work a room, soon had them smiling and asking if they could pet him, which he welcomed.

I wanted more opportunities, however, to take Simon on visits as well as my three-legged dog Tiva who also was very sweet and loving. After viewing the Denver Pet Partners website and the many opportunities with animal-assisted therapy, I decided to take the course in June 2009. That summer Simon, Tiva and I passed the evaluations and we became registered therapy teams.

We visited and did tutoring at the Westwood Housing Project in an after-school program through the University of Denver’s Bridge Project. We also volunteered at Night Lights at the Waterstone Community Church in Littleton.

This is a respite program for parents who have children with mental and physical challenges. I always marveled at how calm Simon was with the children, some of whom had physical challenges like him and how Simon made them smile.

As the years passed, Simon's respiratory problems worsened to the point I had to have a make-shift oxygen chamber for him at home. On March 11, 2014, Simon passed from pulmonary hypertension. He was almost 12 years old. I think Simon's passing was the most heartbreaking loss of my life.

Tiva also was getting older. She was having greater difficulties getting around since she was missing a front leg and also was overweight which was my fault. She really could not do visitation anymore let alone go on walks.

When some people lose a pet, they vow never to get another one because the experience is so painful. For me, getting another pet is a way to honor the one I have lost, especially if one adopts a shelter animal that is at risk of losing its life or never getting a home.

I realized that I preferred to partner with cats and had an affinity for black cats. Reportedly black cats take longer to get adopted from shelters than cats of color. They also are more likely to be euthanized.

In the summer of 2014, I saw a ten (10) month old black cat on one of the social media sites. Harold was in a foster home through Community Cats of Colorado. I understood he had been pulled from a county shelter in northern Colorado. He was listed as having special needs due to a congenital condition that resulted in weakness in his hind legs and the beginning stages of cataracts. I had contacted the rescue and offered to pay for an eye exam by a veterinary ophthalmologist Dr. Hammond. Dr. Hammond saw Harold and said he had cataracts but they were not interfering with his vision.



It was a month or two later that I saw the Director of the rescue doing an event at a store. I asked if they still had Harold. She told me yes and that Harold

would probably be with them for a while. In September 2014, I applied to adopt Harold and visited him at the foster home. He went home with me that day.

Harold proved to be a sweet calm cat who was friendly with my other cats and people. In 2015, he became a registered therapy animal through Denver Pet Partners. He picked up where Simon left off visiting the Westwood Housing project to do tutoring with children and participating in the Night Lights program visiting special needs children.



In the summer of 2016, I was contacted by one of my friends who was with the Fancy Cats Rescue Team in Virginia. In the past, the rescue had pulled a couple diabetic kitties from county shelters because I offered to provide them a permanent home. Ronda advised that Finn, another black cat, had been pulled from a county shelter and had been in foster care since December 2015 and the foster could not keep him any longer as she was moving. Most concerning was Finn's diagnosis. According to the foster, Finn had a "strange gait;" his back legs

splayed out and this never got better. In January 2016, the foster had him assessed by a neurologist. The neurologist diagnosed him with muscular dystrophy based on his gait, "unusual bunny-hop type run," and protruding tongue. His prognosis was poor; the neurologist said that over time his muscles would break down and he would die in a few years. On the positive side, the foster described Finn as the sweetest cat she had ever known---he was very affectionate and had never hissed, growled, scratched or bitten.

Knowing that he may only have a few more years, I agreed to take Finn and he arrived at my home in October 2016. Finn was able to run around and jump on cat trees and I did not notice a weakness in his hind limbs that had progressed. At the end of November, I had Finn seen by a neurologist here. Based on blood work and her exam, the neurologist said he did not have muscular dystrophy. His neurological exam was normal and his abnormal gait noted only in the hind limbs was consistent with a congenital orthopedic problem. His tongue sticking out was a Finn quirk. She described Finn as a happy and sweet boy who had no idea that he is not a normal cat.

Finn proved to be just as sweet as the foster described. He was so calm and never reacted to a hiss or swat by any of my other cats. In June 2017, Finn joined Harold as a registered therapy cat and visited the same sites as Harold. When the pandemic hit, however, visitation was put on hold.

Many people are surprised to see cats as therapy animals. Some ask how do you train a cat to do that. While cats are trainable, I have been told that therapy animals are born. No one can train an animal to have a certain temperament or personality. Harold and Finn were born with their calm, sweet and friendly nature which they happily share with others.

Currently, Harold, Finn and I visit the Westwood Housing Project weekly where we do tutoring through the Colorado “I have a Dream” Foundation. We also make weekly visits to Eaton Senior Communities. Finn also goes monthly to the Bemis Library for the Paws to Read program. Finn also is usually the cat to attend the special events like the distress events at Colorado School of Mines where he may see almost one hundred students.

I am told by the seniors at Eaton how much they enjoy seeing the cats and how they have such a calming presence. Some of the seniors will tell you stories about the cats they have had in their lives and how much they miss them.

At Westwood, some of the children are surprised and excited to see a cat and often want to pet Harold or Finn. One of the children I routinely tutor loves Harold who I call my sleepy boy. When Amia pets Harold as he sleeps, he wakes and nuzzles her hand to which she says “he likes me.”

Students at the colleges comment how calm Finn is, noting that “my cat would never sit still for this.” Some of the students are from out-of-state and they express how they miss their own animals. Seeing and petting Finn helps them fill that void at least for that short period of time.

I was fortunate to adopt Harold and Finn, two cats who physically were far from perfect but shine in their ability to provide comfort and bring smiles to people who meet them. Harold, Finn and I are very glad to be part of such a valuable program like Denver Pet Partners that enriches the lives of people through a mutual love of animals.



Harold and Finn