

Linda Kapler and Sunshine



Sunshine and I are honored to have been selected Denver Pet Partners Team of the Month!

Our team story begins after I retired from teaching high school science. Sunshine is our sixth golden retriever and I have always thought that our Goldens would have made great therapy dogs. As a rule, they adore all people and want to make a connection with them. I was eager to begin therapy team work, but our 12-year-old, Lily, was no longer willing to try something new. This was 2020 and the COVID shutdown had begun, so there were no rescue Goldens or new puppies available in the Denver area. When we began our search, most Goldens had already found homes. My husband, Joe, finally found a

litter in Grand Junction. Lily went with us to help select her new sister from the 11-puppy litter. The breeder had 5 children who gave the pups lots of attention. We fell in love with an adorable pup who fearlessly approached the fence to make friends with Lily.

Three weeks later we brought Sunshine home and then to our longtime vet, who cautioned us that Sunny was the most headstrong puppy that she had ever tried to examine. We were experienced dog owners and were sure that with extra work she would behave just like our other Goldens had. Puppy obedience classes started that next week and Sunshine was in weekly obedience classes for the next two years. We worked on socialization and practiced obedience many times every single day, but her behavior became more challenging as she got older.

Sunshine was very reactive to unknown dogs, obstinate and convinced that she was the pack leader and could do exactly what she wanted to. Our Jekyll & Hyde pup was also loving, attentive and affectionate. She has always been full of exuberant energy, confidence and curiosity. When she was quite young, we started visiting construction sites with all of their noise and chaos. If it was around lunch time, the workers were eager to visit with Sunny. She is also well loved by our 4 granddaughters and she adores them.





Socialization was difficult during the pandemic, but we took many trips to Murdoch's and Home Depot, which she loved. Joe and our granddaughters have also worked hard at training Sunny. She has always had supervised play with other young dogs in our yard and she loves her walks with Joe, hiking in the mountains, and meeting new people. We weren't even sure

that Sunshine could continue to be our pet when she started to be aggressive towards our sweet older dog, Lily. That is when the dog behaviorist got involved; conditioning training and keeping the dogs separated the rest of the time along with all of her obedience work was exhausting and time consuming. Sunny has attended 4 different AKC obedience classes, weekly agility training for 1-1/2 years, nose work training, in addition to working with 2 different individual trainers, and she's attended weekly training with other reactive dogs for two years. I believe that agility training may have been the best training for us to bond as a team. She loved being active and trying to understand each new sequence of skills. Waiting for her turn and needing to take cues from me was important for her to succeed: she now understood the importance of obedience!

I had begun to lose hope of ever working with Sunshine as a therapy dog. Joe has taken her to a park bench in front of a medical building ever since she was very young. They sit side by side on the bench and greet people who are on their way to doctor appointments. Sunny had been there so often that people greeted her by name and some carried treats just in case they might see her there. Towards the end of the pandemic my



sister, Vicki, came to live with us and I was her caretaker. Sunshine decided that it was her job to comfort Vicki through this very rough time and became her healing companion. Sunny was very good at this job and seemed to enjoy the responsibility. Maybe she could do therapy work after all! I was absolutely thrilled when Sunshine passed the Pet Partners evaluation in October 2022. Sunshine loves children, so I thought that she would do well working at libraries, where children would read books to her. Things went well with the library visits for a while, but Sunny decided that it was too boring just listening, so she would put her muzzle underneath the edge of the kid's book and close it. She didn't want to share the child's attention with a book! This behavior, of course, defeated the purpose of the program, so I decided to phase out the library visits for now. Sunshine loves all of the attention at the many distress events she has



attended; the more people visiting her, the better! Hospital equipment noises, medical machines, food carts rattling down the halls at Swedish and ancient elevator vibrations don't seem to bother Sunny, as long as there is a friendly nurse to greet her around the corner. We are visiting Encompass Health Hospital every Monday, greeting patients and staff. I hope to work with the staff and have Sunshine more involved with physical therapy sessions. Our most memorable visit was at the CU Dental School which we have visited weekly for the last year. There was a request for Sunshine to sit with a special needs young woman who had traveled from a rural part of the state. The girl was terrified of dentists and had come to the Dental School because of its great reputation. Sunny seemed to

sense what was needed and the two of them made an emotional connection there in the waiting room. First, there was stroking Sunny's head, then as the girl became calmer, she started to talk to Sunny. She excitedly told Sunshine about her pretty hotel room and how much fun it was to go to a hobby store. The girl happily waved to her new dog friend when it was time for her to say "good-bye" and go to the clinic for her exam. As we began to greet other clients in the waiting room, a dental student rushed out to us and asked if we would be able to sit with the girl again within the clinic. We agreed and followed him. Sitting in the dental chair with tears in her eyes, a radiant smile bloomed on the girl's face when she saw Sunny arrive in the cramped cubicle. There were 6 of us around the dental chair and I was afraid that Sunshine would be frightened by the crowd and all of the equipment, but Sunny went right up to the girl and put her muzzle underneath the girl's hand to comfort her. They bonded again and the girl settled down as she petted Sunshine while they numbed her and administered medication. After the girl was relaxed enough, I was able to encourage Sunshine to leave and let them begin the exam.



You may not be aware that Sunshine isn't only a therapy dog; she is also a movie star. She is currently working on her second film, *Super Ruff II*. My 4 granddaughters successfully wrote, directed, acted, filmed and edited *Super Ruff I* last summer. This summer, Sunny's second super hero film also features her best friend as her sidekick. Sunshine always wants to please the girls

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so she tries to do whatever they have envisioned for her. She's a pretty good actor. Relatives are looking forward to the screening of *Super Ruff II*.

Sunshine will be 4 years old in September and she is now a wonderful companion and a great therapy dog! I am so proud of Sunny and her ability to add cheer to people's lives through our therapy work. It is so rewarding to see a person's face light up when they see Sunshine eagerly enter a room. Hands may involuntarily reach out as she approaches. On entering a crowded waiting room, I am amazed that Sunshine seems to seek out those who are especially needy. We are frequently thanked with comments like "Petting her has been the best part of my day" or "I needed this dog so much today." Sunshine has become the therapy partner that I had dreamed of. I am thankful for the therapy opportunities and support that Denver Pet Partners provides us. We both love our DPP volunteer work and look forward to spending time with lots of brand-new friends and enjoy many new experiences.

