

Debra Austin and Gabby



How Gabby Joined the Family

After years of fostering greyhounds when my kids were young (we adopted 2 and placed 8 in new homes), and after a few years without a dog, I won a teaching award and used the money to purchase Gabby, a Goldendoodle. I had planned from the beginning to volunteer with her as a therapy partner.

Gabby brought the missing spark back into my life that only the presence of a dog can deliver. We have had many adventures together, including hiking, paddleboarding, and road trips to California to visit my son.

Our Therapy Partner Work

Gabby and I have volunteered at the Adams County Courthouse in the District Attorney Victim Witness Comfort Dog Program. We serve people who are preparing testimony for trial and who are waiting for verdicts. They have been victims of or witnesses to crimes, sometimes suffering terrible losses. When that office is slow, we also serve citizens who have been charged with low level crimes, such as vehicle violations, who are waiting in a large room to meet with a District Attorney for the first time on their cases. Finally, we serve the District Attorneys, the Victim Witness Advocates, the Investigators, and their staff.



DPP Team of the Month (August 2025)



Numerous research studies have shown that petting a dog lowers blood pressure, heart rate, and stress hormones.

All the people that we serve as Denver Pet Partners volunteers are under significant stress. Interacting with Gabby makes a difficult situation just a little easier, or more tolerable.

The amazing people who do the Pet Partners testing every two years know that Gabby has been a challenge to register. She has obedience commands nailed. She is a champ at interacting one-on-one. She startles a tiny bit at the dropped object, but gets it together like a rock star. But walk past a neutral dog peacefully, holy cow that's tough! We have failed twice, causing me to walk away in tears. Kudos to those lovely individuals who are so patient with us and help us pass the test successfully ... eventually.

Meaningful Visits

There have been two volunteer visits that I am especially proud of. In one case, we spent our entire shift sitting with a large family that was waiting for a verdict. A loved one had been murdered, and they had just endured the trial of the person accused of the crime. We slowly maneuvered around to interact with the people who seemed to find comfort in petting Gabby. There were tears, but also stories about their loved one. The family was so grateful for Gabby's presence.



Gabby also supported an 11-year-old girl who had to testify about the sexual abuse of her little brother twice. In the hearing before the judge, Gabby was allowed to sit next to the girl in the witness box, while I sat on the floor next to both of them. For the trial, Gabby was not allowed in the courtroom. Many judges believe that the presence of a therapy dog could sway the jury in



some way, and they must protect the fairness of the proceedings. We were allowed to sit in a room behind a door that was next to the witness box in the courtroom. The girl knew that she could take a break at any time to see Gabby. At one point during her testimony, she came through the door. She gave Gabby a full-body hug for 2 or 3 minutes and then returned to the courtroom and finished her testimony.

Gabby is allowed to visit my father's senior living community where she brings joy to my 91-year-old dad and some of the other residents.

DPP Team of the Month (August 2025)

Life at Home

When Gabby was nearly 3 years old, we added a Goldendoodle brother to the family. Although they are both $\frac{3}{4}$ poodle, to ensure that they are the most hypoallergenic for therapy work, the Golden Retriever force is strong with Boone. He is a big goofy boy who is still too puppy-brained to pass the Pet Partners evaluation. When he does pass, he will be an amazing therapy partner because there is no such thing as too much human contact or stimulation for my big boy!



Gabby is now 6 years old, and Boone is 3. Gabby, Boone, and I enjoy many adventures together, from dog parks to dog beaches. We take 2-3 road trips to California every year. Gabby is named for GABA, the neurotransmitter of calm, and Boone is named for the word boon, which means good thing or blessing.

We look forward to sharing the many positive contributions of therapy dogs in future visits!

