

Melissa Donnigan and Parker



How Parker Joined the Family

In 2017, just weeks after losing our beloved Golden of twelve years, our family was not ready to come home to an empty house. We had planned to wait a couple of years before getting another dog, but after about a week we couldn't bear it, and the search began. I found a breeder with a fourteen-week-old Golden Retriever puppy. All of his littermates had been adopted early on, but for some reason, this one kept getting passed over. Looking back, I believe wholeheartedly that he was waiting for us. That overlooked puppy became Parker, and he is now nine years old.



Finding My Calling

I spent over 25 years working as a Child Life Specialist in various Children's Hospitals, and during that time I saw firsthand what a therapy team could do. Newly diagnosed patients who hadn't smiled in weeks would light up the moment a therapy dog walked into the room. Kids who flatly refused to follow a medical protocol would suddenly find a way to make it fun, as long as they got to do it alongside a dog. I knew I wanted to be part of that.

I started training Parker early, and he was shaping up to be the perfect fit. In January 2020, I set a goal to test and be placed as a therapy team by the end of the year. Then COVID hit, and like so many other plans, that one

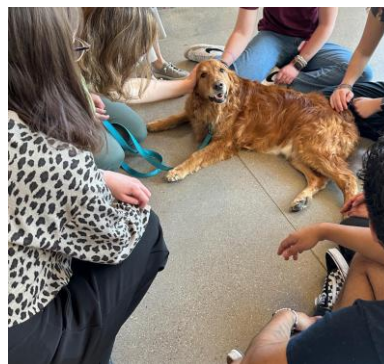
DPP Team of the Month (Sept 2026)



was put on hold. When Pet Partners started testing teams again in 2023, we were ready. We passed our evaluation that November and have been serving together ever since.

Our Therapy Partner Work

After 25 years in the hospital setting, I decided to take a break from that world and try volunteering in schools instead. In January 2023, Parker and I joined Summit View Elementary School, where we visit classrooms regularly. We also provided one-on-one support for a pair of siblings walking through the sudden loss of their father, and helped the school's trauma team support the student body after the death of their beloved principal. The office staff was kind enough to invite us to join their team for the school's fundraising auction, where families could bid on lunch with a staff member. Parker brought in the highest amount of all the office staff, at \$250. We've also had the privilege of volunteering at CU Denver and Arapahoe Community College during finals week, where students are given a chance to de-stress with some puppy love before, between and after exams. I love talking with the students and sharing the relief Parker offers. We have also had the opportunity to volunteer at Camp Wapiyapi, a camp for children and family members affected by cancer. I love sitting with the brave souls and Parker soaks up every bit of the attention.



Meaningful Visits

Our family has been through a significant transition this year. We lost my father-in-law, and my mother-in-law has been navigating a difficult dementia diagnosis. Earlier this year we moved her into a memory care facility, and Parker and I now visit her and the other residents there regularly. Parker and my mother-in-law share a bond I can't fully explain. He was right there with her the moment she lost her husband of 59 years, and something about him changes when they're together. He becomes especially gentle, especially attentive, and greets her differently than he greets anyone else in our family. It's almost as though he understands the weight of what she's carrying, and he simply chooses to sit with her in it.



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Life at Home

Parker loves joining our family for hikes and camping trips, and loves when we pull the fall pumpkins out for carving (he loves pumpkin), and is ALWAYS up for a good cuddle. He plays with his three Golden Retriever friends every chance he gets and, with great patience, tolerates his little brother Hershey, our pet bunny.



Worth the Wait

It took longer than I would have liked to find my partner and earn our designation as a therapy team, but it has been worth every bit of the wait. Volunteering alongside Parker has been a dream come true. He has a way of connecting with people, of sensing grief and loss before a word is spoken, and of drawing people together simply by being himself. Being named DPP's Team of the Month for September 2026 is a tremendous honor, but the truth is that Parker and I feel like we're the ones who receive the gift every time we go out to serve. Whether it's a classroom, a college campus of stressed-out students, a camp for kids facing cancer, or a quiet room with my mother-in-law, Parker shows up exactly the same way: fully present, and exactly what the moment needs. We are so grateful to be part of the DPP family, and we can't wait to see where this partnership takes us next.



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