DPP Team of the Month (November 2026)

Kelli Pratt and Kiki



When we brought Kiki home at eight weeks old, I knew absolutely nothing about therapy dogs. I certainly didn't have a plan for her to become one.

Kiki is a Golden Mountain Doodle--her mom is a Bernedoodle and her dad is a Golden Retriever. She joined our family during Covid. I had been longing for a dog and she became a bright light during that time of uncertainty. As she grew up, one thing became very clear: Kiki loved people. She really, truly loved people.

When she was getting close to a year old, I started wondering if there might be something we could do with her natural love of people and her ability to connect them. I began researching therapy dogs, learning about the requirements and what therapy visits might actually look like.

I trained with Kiki and waited for her to mellow out a little before attempting a therapy dog evaluation. Shortly after she turned three, I finally decided it was time. We passed, and the evaluators described Kiki's personality as “exuberant.”

I couldn't have picked a better word myself.

Although Kiki has mellowed some over the years, her zest for life and her love of making friends have never changed. And when I say friends, I mean pretty much everyone she meets.



Since December 2023, Kiki and I have been a visiting therapy team. We visit Denver Springs Behavioral Health Hospital, the VA Hospital, Denver International Airport, and various special events. Every visit is different, and every person we meet has different needs. One of my favorite things about Kiki is watching how naturally she adjusts herself to the person in front of her.

Kiki has never met a stranger.

When someone is excited to see her, she matches their energy. She might spin in circles, wag her whole body, and then flop dramatically onto the floor, ready for belly rubs. Her enthusiasm is contagious, and it is hard not to smile when Kiki is celebrating your arrival as though you are an old friend.

When someone is sad or struggling, Kiki seems to understand that they need something different.



She will gently approach them, rest her head on their lap, and patiently wait for gentle pets. Her energy becomes quiet and calm. She doesn't need to be told what to do. She just seems to know.

I've seen Kiki help patients who were experiencing or approaching panic attacks simply by being present and bringing her calming energy into the room. I've watched her bring smiles to the faces of hospital patients who hadn't smiled in days.

Those moments are incredibly meaningful to me because Kiki doesn't know these people's stories. She doesn't know what they are going through. She doesn't judge them or expect anything from them. She simply shows up as Kiki and offers whatever she has to give.

Sometimes, that's a little excitement and playfulness.

Sometimes, it's a belly rub.

And sometimes, it's simply resting her head on someone's lap and being there.

There is one visit in particular that I know I will never forget.

There was a gentleman who had been very quiet and withdrawn for days. He sat and gently stroked Kiki's fur. He didn't say much, but he seemed content just to sit with her.

While he was petting Kiki, another patient asked me what breed she was. I explained that she is a Golden Mountain Doodle—her mom is a Bernedoodle and her dad is a Golden Retriever.

Then I gave my usual explanation: she's half Golden, but she's not golden.

Kiki is completely black.

The withdrawn gentleman who had been sitting there listening quietly whispered,

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“But her heart is golden.”



I don't think I'll ever forget that moment.

It was such a simple statement, but somehow, it captured exactly what I have come to understand about therapy work with Kiki. He wasn't talking about the color of her fur. He was talking about who she is.

Kiki may be black on the outside, but her heart really is golden.

She has never met a stranger. Every person she encounters is a potential new friend. She brings joy to people who need a reason to smile, calm to people who are overwhelmed, and companionship to people who may simply need someone to sit beside them for a while.

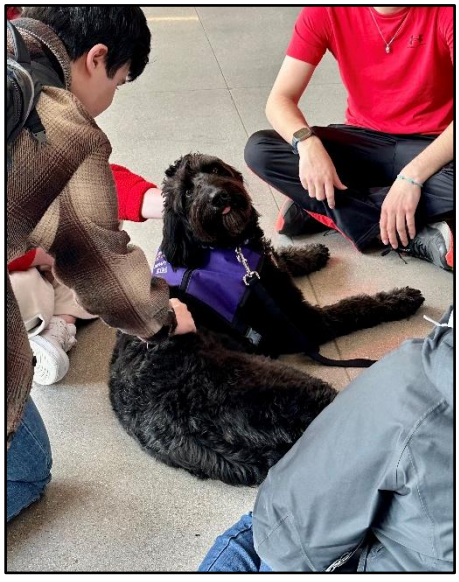
Kiki has a way of making people feel like they matter.

That's what has surprised me most about therapy work. I originally started this journey because I knew Kiki loved people. I wanted to find a way to share that gift with others.

What I didn't expect was how much I would learn from watching her.

Kiki doesn't worry about whether someone looks different, acts differently, or is having a difficult day. She doesn't wonder whether someone will like her. She simply approaches people with an open heart, assuming they are a friend.

And maybe that's part of what makes her such a good therapy dog.



She meets people where they are.

If they want to laugh, she's ready to make them laugh.

If they want to play, she's ready to play.

If they want to talk, she'll listen.

And if they are hurting, she's perfectly happy to sit quietly beside them.

We spent years training and waiting for her exuberance to settle into something we could bring into a therapy setting. But I've come to realize that her exuberance was never something that needed to disappear. It is part of

what makes Kiki who she is. She has simply learned how to channel it.



Her zest for life is still unmatched. Her enthusiasm for meeting new people is still unmistakable. And every person we encounter while visiting is, in Kiki's mind, another friend she hasn't met yet.

Since beginning our therapy journey, I've learned that the impact of a therapy animal isn't always obvious. Sometimes it is a smile. Sometimes it is a hand reaching out to touch soft fur. Sometimes it is a moment of calm during an overwhelming day.

And sometimes, it is a quiet voice reminding us of something beautiful:

Her heart is golden.

And I feel incredibly lucky that I get to be beside her and see the difference she makes.

