



INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS

PETS HELPING PEOPLE

Animal-Assisted Interactions: Volunteering with Your Companion Animal



2023 INFORMATION FOR POTENTIAL ITA ASSOCIATES

How to Start?

First, please know that **ITA does not accept service, assistance or emotional support dogs to become therapy animals.** We are committed to the wellbeing of both animals and people, and we feel that it is asking too much of any dog to subject him or her to the stress and emotional pressure of more than one of these huge and challenging jobs.

Intermountain Therapy Animals (ITA) is based in Salt Lake City and was founded in 1993. We ask anyone who is interested in becoming an associate visiting team with ITA to start by going through several steps. **Reading this document completely is the first step.** It will explain the requirements and process to qualify for this very unique kind of volunteering.

Once you have read and considered the information in this document, as well as completed the ITA Self Assessment (Step 2), watched the video (Step 3) and read our ITA Teaching and Training Philosophy (Step 4), make a list of your questions and then **call us to set an in-person interview.**

We like to meet you and your animal companion to discuss the training and time commitments, answer all your questions about the process, and help you determine whether this is a kind of volunteering that you will both enjoy before you invest in becoming trained, registered and insured. Please recognize that **if your animal doesn't love this idea as much as you do, you would never find it to be rewarding.**

This interview is **required** before you may register for a workshop and team screening. These interviews take 30-45 minutes and are **by appointment only.**

The classes, workshops and screenings are scheduled only a limited number of times each year, and they fill up fast, so please contact the ITA Coordinator(s) in your area to find out about the current schedule:

In Utah ~ ITA Headquarters at 801.272.3439

In Montana ~ Bozeman area: Nancy Dodd at nancydodd3@gmail.com or **406.570.5698**

~ Billings area: Julie Myers at kotaskennelsinfo@gmail.com or **406.860.9573**;
or Linda Overstreet at airspurprz@aol.com or **406.698.1183**

~ Helena area: Cheri Purnell at waggles722@gmail.com or **406.461.1051**

~ Flathead Valley area: Yvonne Nanasi at femialady@gmail.com or **603-305-0034**

In Idaho ~ Bonnie Hong at idahoITA2020@gmail.com or **208.520.0991** (or) Connie Sharkey at **208.404.1672**

If you are approved, you will be invited to register for the basic training workshop or classes, and then a team screening for you and your animal together.

SCHEDULE & COSTS

Participating in animal-assisted interactions with your companion animal is a volunteer service with great potential satisfaction and reward, but it is not a casual undertaking and not suitable for everyone. It is a serious responsibility that involves health, safety, and extremes of emotion and behavior. Volunteers need to be able to deal appropriately with patient/clients during the most difficult and challenging times in their lives.

As such, it requires an initial investment and then ongoing education, training, and commitment. These are the costs involved in training and preparation to make this commitment:

THE TEAM TRAINING COURSE (WORKSHOP OR CLASS SERIES) – \$120

Some of the important information you will learn:

- How you and your animal companion can prepare for registration as a volunteer team
- Animal-assisted interactions (AAI): the differences between animal-assisted therapy (AAT), animal-assisted activities (AAA) and animal-assisted education (AAE).
- How to recognize signs of stress in your animal companion
- How to prepare your animal for an AAI visit
- How to conduct an AAI visit and what to bring with you

A good therapy dog needs to be comfortable getting big hugs in unexpected ways. That is one of many skills and aptitudes we test for in the Team Screening.



(August 2022)

- The appropriate terminology and conversational approaches for various clients
- How to identify situations where animal visits are not appropriate
- Common concerns of health-care and human services professionals about AAIs and how to address them
- How to get started in various kinds of facilities (hospitals, care centers, rehab centers, detention programs and more)

TEAM ASSESSMENT FOR YOU AND YOUR ANIMAL – \$50

Screening of person-animal teams is done by licensed ITA Team Evaluators. Individual appointments will be scheduled for you and your animal as a team, to evaluate skills and aptitudes for visiting animal programs.

JOINING INTERMOUNTAIN THERAPY ANIMALS – \$99/YEAR

Those who complete the workshop training and successfully pass the screening may then join ITA. Intermountain Therapy Animals membership includes liability insurance, ITA uniform shirt, scarf, orientation and mentoring, member bulletins and newsletter, continuing education, and opportunity to participate in AAA/AAT programs at facilities served by ITA.

ITA's R.E.A.D.® Program (Reading Education Assistance Dogs®) has now spread throughout the United States, Canada and 27 other countries around the world. It's an unparalleled way to help children develop a love of books and reading while improving their confidence and communication skills.



ONE VOLUNTEER'S OPINION: NANCY ROSEN AND HER PARTNERS, MAGGIE & KC

KC and I were asked to go to the room of a little girl at Shriner's who had just had back surgery. The therapists were helping her out of bed. She was obviously in great distress, crying out in pain at each small increment of progress between lying in bed and standing up.

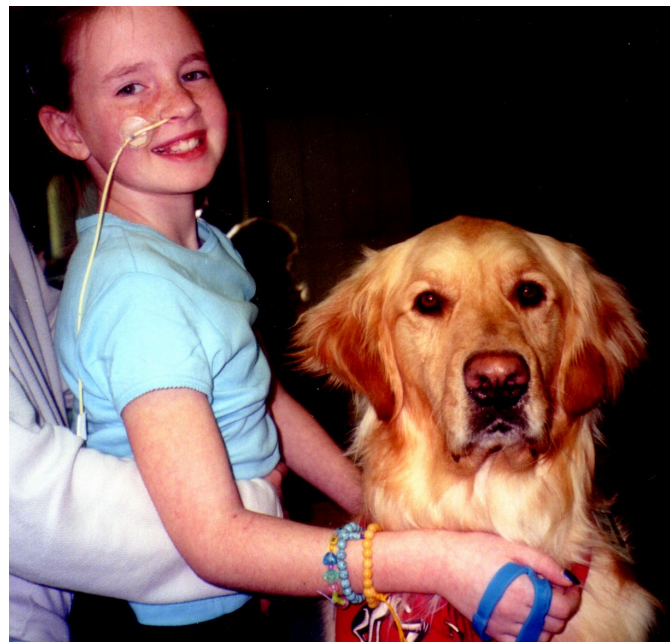
But when I brought KC—who immediately kissed her tears—to her, a smile broke through those tears. She first held KC in her lap, then held her leash while being walked around the room, and she smiled throughout the whole painful ordeal. After her therapy, she sat with KC on her lap for another ten minutes, just smiling and petting the dog. We were even invited to sign her stuffed cloth “autograph dog.”

Our pet partners do their magic so well. They create mini-miracles just by being their natural, loving selves. We go from week to week bringing comfort and love. We were all trained



in the basics—that animals can help people focus away from their pain and forget their limitations—and we hear others tell these little heartwarming anecdotes. But nothing compares to direct experience, and this experience has been touching for me—dramatic proof that what we do really makes a difference.

– Nancy Rosen



NICOLE & HOOP: ANOTHER STORY

Having suffered a traumatic brain injury in a rollover car accident, Nicole, age 18, was still totally unresponsive after three months at LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City. Her physical and occupational therapists and speech pathologist—and her parents—were frustrated: Nicole would do nothing for them. When ITA volunteer team Hoop and Lisa Towner joined the effort, Nicole responded immediately. She did spontaneous appropriate dog petting, hugging and snuggling; she touched various body parts on Hoop on request; and she reached for biscuits to feed him. She even picked the correct color of biscuit with 100% accuracy. When standing with assist, Nicole would reach for a ball and drop it for Hoop, and soon progressed to throwing it for him. The team came for extra sessions with Nicole and her therapists because of the rapid progress Hoop was helping her achieve.

Nicole's mother says, “Hoop is the one thing Nicole has connected to immediately, the one thing that made her feel normal. Usually she is so detached, as if “nobody is home” in there, but with Hoop she was definitely awake and responsive. He drew things from her effortlessly that nobody had been able to. Her expression softened—from a tense, clenched jaw and tight shoulders to a relaxed mouth and shoulders. It's wonderful. Hoop is a Godsend.”





What Makes a Person and Animal Suitable to be an ITA Volunteer Therapy Team?

We look for very specific qualities in the people and their companion animals who will qualify as ITA associate therapy teams. Pet owners who are considering this kind of volunteer service should read the following with great care and consideration because, while this manner of volunteering can be extremely valuable and rewarding, it is not enjoyable or appropriate for every person or every animal.

IMPORTANT—Qualifying Ages

For Humans: Please note that all ITA human volunteers must be at least **16 years of age**.

For Animals: Please note that ***your dog must be at least 2 years and under 10 years of age*** to qualify for the initial screening. (Cats must be at least one year old; pocket pets like guinea pigs must be at least six months old). If you have rescued/adopted your animal, ***you must have lived with it for a minimum of six months*** before you may test to be an ITA Volunteer Therapy Team.

Also, please note that ***we no longer accept service, assistance or emotional support animals*** for therapy work.

What Qualities Does a PERSON Demonstrate as Part of a Successful Team?

Providing animal-assisted interactions (AAI) is a *human health and social service*. It is not a sport or competition, and being a therapy dog is not a title to accrue. As such, your role in the process is extremely important. It is not a simple, casual or stress-free kind of volunteering; many liken it to a para-profession, and you will often be “alone” (meaning, no group of ITA colleagues together, all doing similar things) with patients. You will need to be brave, steady, direct, confident, emotionally mature, and flexible, among other qualities. And most importantly, you will need to have a strong, solid and positive relationship with your companion animal, and be willing to treat him/her as a partner, not a tool or piece of equipment.

- We look for people who demonstrate good social skills, who can smile and relax and relate comfortably with their animal companion and with other people. And, as stated above, ***you need to be at least 16 years old***.
- We also observe your relationship with your animal—how well do you know this animal, its personality and its needs? How does the animal feel about you—does it respond to your cues and requests? How do you make corrections (tone, style, etc.)?
- We look for things that will be pertinent when you do AAA/AAT visits—such as, are you on time? Did you prepare carefully by reading the material you received? Did you come to the assessment properly prepared? Are you willing to ask questions when you don’t understand something? Do you listen well? Follow instructions?

Consider your willingness, ability and comfort level regarding the following:

- Do you truly enjoy making conversation with strangers, extending yourself in often difficult moments?
- Are you an exceptional listener? Most people rate their own listening skills as average at best. Animal-assisted therapy handlers need to be GREAT listeners, able to empathize and support people who are going through the toughest moments of their lives.
- Will you be comfortable saying no when a therapist or patient/client asks you to do something that you know will not be safe or comfortable for you or your animal?
- Will you be comfortable with the often unpleasant situations surrounding various therapies—such as strong bodily odors, people in pain, people demonstrating angry or unpredictable behaviors?
- Will you be willing to invest your time to learn about the various patient populations you will be working with, such as adults with Alzheimer’s, children with autism, people dealing with mental illnesses or profound physical damage?
- Do your life circumstances permit you to be committed to this volunteering? It cannot be slap-dash, occasional, or casual, because patients will be depending on you and your animal.

What Kinds of Animals Will Qualify?

Besides dogs and cats, there are a great many other species that make wonderful visiting animals and can form strong human-animal bonds. To name just a few: birds, rabbits, goats, domestic rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, ducks and chickens, miniature pigs, llamas, cows and horses.

At this time, Intermountain Therapy Animals specializes in animals that are easily “portable” for taking into healthcare institutions. ***Animals such as snakes, ferrets, lizards, and wild or exotic animals are not accepted.*** This is because wild or exotic animals are not legally acceptable as pets in many states, and without more research documenting their predictability over time, we cannot accurately evaluate their behavior and reaction to stress. Finally, ***we do not accept service, assistance or emotional support animals, or dogs who have had any training in bite work (for sport or protection).*** Please ask us for more information if these are issues that affect you and your animal.

What Makes an Animal Appropriate?

First and foremost, a therapy animal must be enthusiastic about meeting a constant stream of new people, so that they will be happy volunteering with you. This temperament is actually quite rare, but it is essential, and it is *inborn*, not trainable. Animals with the right temperament then should have excellent training so that they are calm, well-mannered and responsive, even in crowded situations and when there are loud or unusual noises. Read the following checklist carefully for details about what makes an animal appropriate for AAA/AAT.

- **Interested in others and actively solicits interactions with new people:** Outgoing, friendly and confident in new settings, and accepting and forgiving of differences in people’s reactions and behavior
- Demonstrates behavior that is reliable, controllable, predictable, and INSPIRES CONFIDENCE in the person s/he is interacting with
- Demonstrates relaxed body posture, moments of sustained eye contact (dependent upon species and breed), and relaxed facial expressions
- More people-oriented than animal-oriented
- Enjoys being petted, touched and hugged
- Able to remain calm with people doing such things as speaking loudly, moving clumsily or clapping
- When approached from the rear, may show curiosity, but does not startle, growl, jump up, bark, eliminate, act shy or resentful
- Can walk on various surfaces reasonably comfortably, including carpet, concrete or asphalt, tile, linoleum, rubber matting and wooden floors

What Kinds of Animals Definitely Will NOT Qualify?

- Any animal that is too energetic and rambunctious, or aggressive to people or other animals, will not pass the assessment. Growling, snapping, lunging, extended barking, raising of hackles, or baring of teeth will disqualify a dog. Sometimes we meet owners who tell us, when their dog starts to growl, that “he’s just talking,” or “that’s just his way to say hello.” Even if that’s true, it doesn’t work to have an animal in school and hospital settings, with people who are sick and perhaps frightened or even tentative about meeting a dog, to have to recoil in fear. Again, any dog trained in bite work, whether for sport or protection, is not eligible to be tested.
- If your pet is in poor health it would not be safe for it or the people s/he meets to be exposed. We visit in situations where clients are medically very fragile, and therapy animals must be picture-perfect in both health and grooming. Animals who are dusty, greasy or stinky do not appeal to clients.
- If your animal is unpredictable (sweet one moment, aggressive the next) or doesn’t like being around people (shy, backs away, gets nervous, quivers, etc.) it would not be suitable.
- We do not accept any dogs who are wolf hybrids, even though many may be wonderful companions, again because they can be unpredictable.
- It is very important for your pet to live inside as a member of your family. Dogs who spend most of their lives outdoors, especially if they sleep outside and/or are kept chained most of the time, do not make good therapy animals. Dogs who are calm, well behaved, well socialized members of their pack, and truly love meeting lots of new people on a regular basis, are most successful as therapy dogs.





What Happens During the ITA Team Assessment?

IMPORTANT: The ITA team assessment is essentially a role-play of all the things you may encounter during typical AAI visits. You will learn appropriate skills during the team training workshop, and will have several opportunities to examine, practice and understand why all the various elements are important to successful visits.

This is a TEAM assessment, not a dog test or performance title. In fact, there is actually more weight placed on how you as a handler deal with various situations you are likely to encounter during visits. You must be consistently supportive and encouraging to your animal, demonstrate a strong bonded relationship, while interacting with your animal and the “patients” and being conscious of the environment around you. There will be various new people, equipment and situations that you will often encounter during visits, and you will both hopefully be relaxed and comfortable throughout. ***All aspects of the assessment must be passed satisfactorily.***

Things we look for:

- Our chief focus is on your **relationship**: Does your animal look to you for guidance? Trust that you will always have his/her best interests in mind? Respond to you? Do you relate to your animal with kindness, soft conversation and positive directions?
- Do both you and your partner enjoy and accept all manner of friendly strangers, some alone and some in small groups, and interact in warm, socially skilled ways?
- You both must be clean, healthy and well-groomed, presenting a professional appearance.
- You and your dog must be able to walk together with a loose lead—no pulling or dragging. Then you must both walk through a crowd and be subjected to visual and noise distractions with your dog remaining comfortable.
- Your dog must do a sit, a down, a stay-in-place, and a come-when-called. S/he must also be able to meet another dog with perfect manners (i.e., not vocalizing or approaching without your permission).
- Your dog must not object to a thorough, all-over handling by a stranger (fingers in mouth, on tail, feet, etc.), who may exhibit some irregular motions and verbalizations; and to receiving a restraining hug.
- Ability to ignore a treat and a toy at your request; to take a treat gently
- Ability/willingness for your animal to stay for 3-4 minutes with a stranger while you leave the room

Our assessment has been designed primarily for dog teams, since they make up 95% of our volunteers. If you have another kind of animal companion, there will be some variation in the procedures to accommodate species differences. If you have questions or feel unsure after reading this information, please feel free to call and ask for more detailed responses.

Thanks for your interest! Animal-assisted interactions are a concept whose time has come, and if you and your companion animal both decide to join us in doing this work, you will have much joy ahead of you.



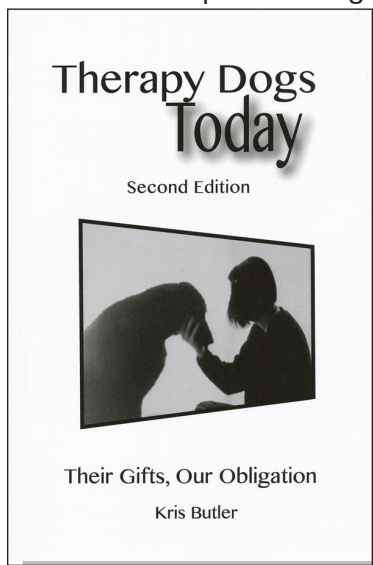
Some Things to Consider About the Human Expectations Placed on Therapy Dogs

as you consider therapy volunteer work with your companion

The following quotes are from Kris Butler, a woman with long experience doing animal-assisted therapy. The quotes are taken from her book, *Therapy Dogs Today, Their Gifts, Our Obligation*. We urge you to read them carefully and consider how your dog may “fit into this picture” as you consider volunteering as a team.

“Nothing else dogs do compares to the kinds of intrinsically stressful social interaction that takes place when they visit clinical, educational, or post-trauma situations. No other canine-related events, no sport nor competition, requires a dog to enter the intimate zones of unfamiliar humans and remain there for several minutes of petting and hugging.

“Brief interactions with judges in show rings do not compare to the prolonged and repeated contact that takes place during animal-enhanced programs. Search-and-rescue dogs often work in



Excerpts from *Therapy Dogs Today, Their Gifts, Our Obligation*, by Kris Butler, Funpuddle Publishing 2004, ISBN 0-9747793-X.

chaotic environments, but not with prolonged physical contact of unfamiliar people. Service dogs work beautifully in public settings, but the public is actively discouraged from touching, petting and distracting them. Humans have developed a role for visiting dogs like no other in existence. The role is new, specific and profound.

“Most dogs have been bred for generations to distinguish between outsiders and family, and to act accordingly. There has never been a breed of dog designed to enjoy encroachment from strangers. Dogs who actually enjoy interactions in clinical and educational settings are very rare, and the uniqueness of their talent should be appreciated.” (p. 31)

“Dogs who are comfortable and enjoy unfamiliar people will remain engaged with their assessors and will offer at least some eye contact.

“Conversely, dogs who are not willing to initiate contact or remain engaged with their assessors probably do not want to be touched and petted by unfamiliar people.” (p. 44)

“For dogs, the effects of real human emotion, the stress of having large numbers of unfamiliar humans grabbing and hugging them, contact with toxic surfaces, and overcoming sensory stimuli are not simple training issues. These are humane issues. Certainly, dogs can be trained to persevere in spite of distractions and sensory bombardment. Sadly, these conditioning process inadvertently teaches these dogs not to use calming signals, and less savvy handlers and evaluators mistake the lack of signaling for ‘being comfortable with.’ . . . Just because some dogs are willing to tolerate overwhelming environments does not mean people have license to exploit their visiting partners. Some environments impose too much upon dogs.” (p. 59-60)

“Humans have a history of using natural resources indiscriminately, then feeling sorry afterward.” (p. 82)

(Used with permission.)

Trainer Patricia McConnell on Therapy Dogs

Therapy Dogs — Born or Made?

January 19th, 2012 (from her blog at www.theotherendoftheleash.com)

One of my motivations for talking about therapy dogs is the number of clients I have who want me to help them prepare their dog for therapy work. Sometimes it's been like swimming downstream on a warm, cozy river. The dog was a perfect fit and ended up doing wonderful work in the community. Other times... well, it's been reminiscent of trying to paddle up a cold, frothy waterfall. The fact is, therapy work can be hard work, and is inherently stressful, and it takes a special kind of dog to be both good at it and to enjoy it. The directors of AAA and AAT (AAActivities and AATherapy) groups and programs will tell you that one of their greatest challenges is working with people who want to volunteer but whose dogs just don't qualify. Here's a summary of the characteristics of a good therapy dog prospect, in hopes it will be helpful for those who are interested in doing this wonderful work:

- **Affiliative:** This seems like a no-brainer, but the fact is that many dogs are presented for therapy work who really don't like strangers all that much. They love their owners and good friends, but aren't all that interested in other people. Good therapy dogs need to be the kind of dogs who ADORE people, all people, and want nothing more than to connect with them. It is, after all, the emotional connection that is often the therapeutic part of AAA and AAT. It seems to me that dogs sort into four categories: 1) adore people, care little for other dogs, 2) adore dogs, care little for unfamiliar people, 3) adore members of both species and are thrilled to meet new ones and 4) adore neither dogs or people, except maybe their owner. Needless to say, only categories 1 and 3 are good therapy prospects.

- **Physically Calm:** Many of the dogs who think all people hung the moon regrettably don't fit into this category. Leaping, licking, pawing and body slamming just don't work in senior centers and hospitals. This is why so many dogs don't qualify when they are young, but could be great prospects when they are older. I wrote a chapter with Audrey Fine for his great book *The Handbook of Animal Assisted Therapy*, and we had a long discussion about how many dogs would be GREAT for therapy work when they are 6. Or 8, but their owners get them evaluated at the age of 2, the dogs are not "passed" and their owners never try again.

- **Psychologically Sound and Non-reactive:** It doesn't matter how much training or conditioning you do, therapy dogs need a certain level of rock solid soundness to be good prospects. Of course, the context does matter: some dogs are great in senior centers but are uncomfortable around children and would be disasters in a children's hospital. It's important to remember that AAA and AAT include a vast range of experiences, so every dog must be evaluated based on what they are going to be doing. But it's still essential to keep in mind that although your job is in part to protect your dog, once you are inside a facility you will have limited control over what happens. And what can happen (someone grabbing your dog, weird noisy medical equipment coming on, a medical crisis that results in tremendous chaos) is sometimes enough to terrify a sensitive dog.

Included in this category, although albeit somewhat different conceptually, is the state of being "emotionally mature" or able to handle frustration and deal with the world with a calm, measured demeanor. Again, just as in people, sometimes this takes several years to master.

- **Ridiculously clean and healthy:** Unless you work in health care facilities it is easy to forget how

differently sanitation needs to be handled in facilities and hospitals than it does in your own home. Even more so since the COVID pandemic. Pet Pals here in Madison, which organizes visits to the Children's Hospital through the UW Vet School, requires that all dogs in the program go through extensive veterinary evaluations twice a year. This includes an entire day of testing for a vast range of diseases, from salmonella to MRSA. In this case the dogs are visiting children who are often immune compromised, and so their requirements are more stringent than some, but any facility, from a senior center to a hospital, is a very, very different place than your home. Germs love the kind of places that therapy dogs go to visit, and they can move around like wild-fire within very vulnerable populations.

• **Aware of their Job?** This is gravy, pure gravy, but the fact is that some dogs do more than happily sit with strangers or participate in structured therapy treatment plans, as beneficial as that can be to some people. Such dogs seem to sense why they are there, and seek out people who are especially needy, and make an emotional connection with them that changes their life. These connections happen, and hearing about them is enough to make you all gooey-eyed. Special stuff indeed.

The most important part of the therapy dog equation is the client who will be receiving services. If you mainly want to spend some time with your dog, and your primary focus isn't the senior citizen who is profoundly lonely, or the child who is struggling to read, or the teenager who has endured a lifetime of abuse, you should choose another activity. There are many engaging and fun things you can do with your dog. Therapy work is for those who sincerely want to help others.

– Mary Burch, PhD
in *Does Your Dog Have What it Takes to Be A Therapy Dog?*
(a publication of the American Kennel Club)

Author Jon Katz has written 18 books, mostly about dogs. In one of them (*Soul of a Dog* - 2009) he offers his own insights into the ongoing discussion of whether animals have souls, telling stories about the whole range of critters he keeps on his Bedlam Farm in upstate New York. His observations about the character differences between his two current border collies, Rose and Izzy, have much value for people considering therapy work with their own canine.

Rose

Rose is my right hand—my entire right arm actually. On my farm, the clarion call is: “Rosie, let’s go to work.” That’s all it takes for this ferociously energetic and whip-smart border collie to spring into action.

Rose doesn’t play much, or cuddle much. She doesn’t even care much about eating, and pays scant attention to treats, rightly dismissing them as bribes. Unlike most dogs I have owned, Rose doesn’t crave the warm body of a human at night, preferring to patrol the farmhouse, checking through the windows on the pastures and the barns. She doesn’t appreciate being cooed over, or having her belly rubbed. Apart from me, she isn’t all that crazy about humans in general; she doesn’t grasp the point of pleasing strangers, as they don’t lead her to work. When we’re not working, she isn’t even all that interested in me.

She’s always working, or waiting to work; it’s deep in her bloodlines, the result of generations of service. Anything that doesn’t have to do with work is extraneous to her, an interruption, an annoyance.

When Rose approaches me, it’s not a bid for a pat or a biscuit, but a signal that something is wrong. A gate is open, perhaps, or a predator is about.

There’s a vulnerability about Rose, even a sweetness in her eyes, but there’s no mistaking her priorities. Smart, tough, determined, she is essential, but rarely the dog that people melt over or want to take home. She doesn’t live to show me unconditional love; I doubt she could care less about making a sick person feel better, or charming a small child. Rose is a working dog, the kind bred to perform tasks with humans. And she’s a great dog.

Izzy

Izzy, my other border collie, came out of absolutely nowhere and eventually brought me to work as a hospice volunteer, one of the most moving and spiritual experiences of my life. Izzy seems to see deep into the human psyche.

One boiling, sticky July day, Izzy and I drove to a nursing home far out in farm country. It was a one-story brick-and-mortar building, neglected outside and grim inside. Most of its residents suffered from deepening dementia, and many of them were crying or shouting out as we walked inside to visit hospice patients.

Every nursing home is different. Some are quiet, almost serene; others, like this one, are difficult places to be, filled with troubled patients, and severely challenged staffs.

Edith was nearly ninety, and no one had been able to speak to or communicate with

her for months. She was angry and confused, repeatedly pushing her wheelchair in one direction, then another. If you got too close, the nurses cautioned, she might lash out, turn her wheelchair away, complain loudly that she had something to do, or simply shout, “Get away!” Even the hospice workers, always so attentive and persistent, had nearly given up on getting through to her.

I approached Edith in the hallway, calling her name. She ignored me, refused to look at Izzy, backed her wheelchair into the wall and then abruptly wheeled around and almost ran over Izzy’s paw. He backed up just in time, and so did I.

I consulted the hospice social worker, then a nurse. We all shook our heads, uncertain that we could do much. Izzy, meanwhile, approached from one side of the chair, which caused Edith to yell at him, and then from the rear. “Get out, get away,” she shouted at him and at all of us.

I was about to do just that when Edith happened to lower her hand by the side of her wheelchair. Izzy, seeing his chance, darted forward and slid his head under her palm, fixing his eyes on hers.

Edith froze. She stared back down at Izzy, meeting his gaze, appearing to actually see him for the first time. She took his head in both her hands, and she smiled a bit, for what was probably just seconds. To those of us watching, though, it seemed a much longer time. It was stunning to see, the perceptible bond Izzy was making with this woman whose soul had appeared to be buried, perhaps lost for good, a spirit no human had been able to reach in recent memory.

The nurse started to weep; the hospice social worker, who’d seen so much, was already wiping her eyes. Izzy’s spirit was so focused, generous, and loving that the hallway seemed to almost glow, to fill with light. Edith stroked him with a tenderness that, given her earlier agitation, was breathtaking.

No dog has affected my life more than Rose, or done more to make my life [on the farm] possible each day.

No dog has introduced me to deep human relationships, or woven himself more thoroughly into my life, than Izzy has.

Every dog is unique, and so is our relationship with him or her. We each know our dog in a different way, in the context of how we live or work with them, what they mean to us, how our own lives have shaped our perceptions of them. If no two dogs are exactly alike, neither is there a universal relationship with them.

– by Jon Katz, *in Soul of a Dog*