

Difficult Dog Provides Hope

By Suzanne Morrone

The dogs I end up with are usually rescued dogs who come with a lot of baggage. Until I started training with the Santa Clara Dog Training club I never knew how much progress could be made with a difficult dog.

My husband and I were exploring in the desert. On a small dirt track that dead-ended at a pile of rocks we found a puppy nearly dead from injuries and dehydration. We scooped him up and raced towards town. As he lay in my arms I took note of his pointed ears, long nose: My kind of dog.



After hearing from the local vet that the pup's leg would need amputating we knew we had to keep the puppy and bring him home to our vet for a second opinion. We named the puppy; not very originally, Arizona (Zoney, Zones, Zona etc.) and he went through medical procedure after procedure finally having his front leg amputated.

We started coming to obedience class, but he was terrified of everyone, dogs and people. People gave him treats, allowed him to sniff their dogs, gave me lots of tips on training, and patiently helped him gain some much needed confidence. One person who

trains with us saw my husband walking Zoney and said, "That's an Australian Kelpie". I had no idea what that was, but looked on the computer and sure enough "he looks to be all Kelpie," as the breeder I contacted in Australia told me.

I noticed that everywhere we went people were drawn to Zoney, the more unlikely the person the more dramatic the reaction; gang kids, immigrant kids who are terrified of dogs, and most especially people who are ill wanted to connect with him. While any dog is an ambassador for love, Zoeny has the special ability to touch the deepest part of the human condition: compassion. It seemed to me his calling was to be a therapy dog.

With the help of all the people we meet at training, both in class and out, we passed the Therapy Dog test and we needed to find a place to work. I was pretty sure Zoney wouldn't do well in the traditional jobs most therapy dogs take. Arizona likes children better than adults, so I thought I'd try the library, in the Tail Waggin' Tutors program. But I really wanted us to do something to help cancer patients.

I wanted to bring Arizona to the American Cancer Society Relay for Life event. My grandson's mom had breast cancer and we went the first year as she was just finishing chemo. Thin as a rail, and bald, her slow lap around the track in the survivors walk was a very moving event. The following year I brought

Arizona, and was confronted by signs everywhere saying, “no dogs allowed” As we stood on the sidelines a woman in a wheelchair approached us. She was concerned about Arizona and after we spoke she said seeing him was the best thing that had happened to her that day. She asked me to find a way to bring him back the following year.

It took me two more years to finally get Arizona certified with TDI and then to find someone who helped me negotiate with the American Cancer Society to allow a dog to work at their event. They had many stipulations for us, including that we take part in the opening ceremony, explaining why we were there, why others dogs aren’t allowed, and to tell Arizona’s story. They also insisted he be clearly identified as a therapy dog. Being insured isn’t enough apparently for these public events, dogs have become unwelcome because everyone fears a lawsuit, in spite of TDI’s million dollar insurance coverage. Without the help of the librarian who put her trust in us, and then the help of the event coordinator we never would have been allowed to work at the Relay for Life.

I was worried Arizona would be afraid of the stage, the microphone, the balloons, streamers, and doves being released, choirs singing. There is no way to prepare a dog for an event where no dogs are ever allowed.

Our audience was divided up into “survivors” in purple t-shirts “caretakers” with purple ribbons across their chests, some who were both survivors and caretakers, and many young people who had committed to walking 24 hours straight to raise money for cancer research.

The survivors ranged from people who look and hopefully are healthy to those who were thin, young women with inch long hair growing back after chemo, people in wheel chairs, people with pic lines and bandages -- people who need hope.

And if anyone can offer hope it is a dog that was nearly dead at a dead end dirt road in the middle of nowhere. The odds couldn’t have been worse for Arizona, and now he is a working therapy dog offering that most precious commodity to those who most need it. Hope. And what those people who come up to pat him, who ask about his story again and again, what they offer in return is the blessing of compassion for their fellow creatures, for each other, for all of us.

Arizona was brave and beautiful and willing. He led the survivor’s walk, hopping along happily on his one front leg. One little dog standing on three legs can make a difference, and all the people standing behind him who helped him grow into his confidence, who taught me to teach him, have helped us on this journey. The beauty of this “community” page is this is a community. And the ripples that spread out from each of us touch lives far away in a manner we might never know. I’m proud to bring my difficult dogs for training and proud when they in turn offer comfort and joy to others.