

PIPER: THE BIG HERO IN A SMALL PACKAGE

Janis Burton

Introduction:

During Mayflower's sponsored 2001 agility trial in West Springfield, Massachusetts, an audience of over 700 people and 1000 dogs paid tribute to Jean Owen and her little Corgi "Piper" for their therapy work during 9/11. The room became very silent... It was a moving moment, and I realized that many would like to know more about this miracle Corgi.

Thank you, Jean and Piper, for sharing your experience.

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But probably not one of us was there with our Corgi, as Jean was

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Jean Owen always knew that she had been blessed with a therapy dog. Living in a high-rise apartment building in Lower Manhattan, New York City, with 250 other apartment dwellers, she and Piper, a red and white Pembroke Welsh Corgi, would hang out for their regular "20 minute visits" in the lobby before going up to their own apartment. The older inhabitants lingered to pet and talk to Piper, and looked forward to this. Piper brought smiles to peoples' faces and in their eyes, she never feared wheel chairs, and just had a grand old time. In addition, Jean, Piper, and Girlie- her Australian Shepherd, would stop by three local fire stations to visit the staff. The dogs would immediately disappear into the back office to be fed bagels. But Jean never realized that these little rituals, along with obedience training, would prepare them (somewhat) for September 11th and the work that they were requested to do shortly afterwards.

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Piper

mile away from the WTC. Jean said, "I watched while people rushed by me covered with dust and blood. Others, like me, not hurt, rushed into local delis to grab bottles of water to wash out peoples' eyes. In this chaos, I forgot about my two dogs, but then I'd look back, and there they were sitting, right there, waiting for me."

After the trauma of that day, people's lives changed. Jean wanted to do something to help but wasn't sure what. She remembered the visits she and her dogs used to make to the three local firehouses and decided to go back with Piper and Girlie. Sadly, she learned that the first fire station lost their entire squad. The other two firehouses lost onehalf of their battalion. "When we visited," Jean explained, "I never said much, instead, I just let the guys hug my dogs. The dogs would run into the back room and the men would just say — ah Piper and Girlie. That was all that was needed."

A few weeks later, Jean got a call from Delta Society, a pet therapy organization, asking if she would go to the WTC Family Crisis Center that had been set up for the victims and their families. Waiting rooms guarded by high security had a nursery and counseling services for children who had lost one or both parents. The emotional climate was very draining. Particularly poignant was the "Wall of Bears"- stuffed animals sent and displayed from the families of the Oklahoma City bombing that symbolized their empathy for these latest terrorist victims.

At the Center, Jean let each dog visit different groups of people since both dogs worked differently. Girlie was comfortable with the "noisy" kids, while Piper was drawn to the quieter and sadder children. Piper gravitated to people visibly upset and would just lean on their legs.

One Hispanic woman said to her son, in Spanish, that she was very afraid of dogs. (She didn't know that Jean spoke Spanish.) Her son, knowing the comfort that Piper and Girlie could provide, said, "why don't you get closer, Mother?" Instinctively Piper gently leaned against the woman who then cried, "This is a sign for my son that everything is ok." It was then that Jean realized that she was where she was supposed to be. She and her team visited that woman many times.

There was another reason for these visits. A big part of the team's job was to help staff, so that they could help others. Jean saw chaplains, nuns, and oth-

ers working there just trying to hold it together. Playing Corgi ball catch or Aussie games lightened their burdens and helped boost their spirits.

While working at the Crisis Center, Jean saw other dogs involved in helping the victims and their families, although Piper was the only Corgi she encountered. Jean saw search and rescue dogs (mainly German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and Aussies) at the Jacob Javits Center, where the major rescue operation was set up. Most of these dogs were sleeping after their hard work, so Jean had little interaction with them.

Jean kept going, despite the emotional stress, because she realized that she did have a purpose and was able to make an impact. She continued for about two and a half months and would do it again in a minute if she had to.

This experience shows the different nature of predictable therapy visits, such as in nursing homes, and crisis situations. For Corgi owners wanting to "be ready" and learn from Jean, she advises: "not to impose yourself. People don't want to chat. They just want to connect in some way." All Jean would say at the end of a visit is: "I'm so very sorry," and leave it at that. Piper, with her nurturing spirit, did all the rest.

Post Script:

When interviewing Jean for this article, another smaller but dramatic story unfolded as well.

In March, 2002, Piper ruptured a disk in her back and both of her hind legs became paralyzed. At many points in time, Jean thought that her Corgi would never walk again. During one of Piper's visits to the Crisis center, she lunged to avoid a large plank. Perhaps that movement twisted her back, along with the stress she might have carried with her from the people who were hurting.

After surgery for a ruptured disc and a long stay in the vet hospital, the doctor told Jean that Piper would most likely need a cart. Jean, however, was determined to give Piper more time and tried complementary therapies including hydrotherapy, acupuncture and electric stimulus to regenerate nerves. The combination of those three methods finally made an impact and Piper began to have voluntary movement of her back legs. Over nine months Piper improved, and now it is hard to tell that she ever had a problem!

Who couldn't argue that Piper is a true miracle dog!