



Simba really 'laid back'

Bob Lind

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What they wanted for the memory care unit, Mary Jo Hannasch says, was a "laid back, calm dog."

That's what they got. And then some...

Her name was Simba, she was a golden retriever and she had a special talent for just lying around.

And she became the darling of Bethany Homes.

Mary Jo is director of social services at Bethany Homes, Fargo. She was one of those who felt a companion dog would be an asset for the memory care unit.

So in 2000 Bethany contacted the Great Plains Assistance Dogs Foundation, Jud, N.D., which trains dogs to assist people with disabilities. Did it have a dog who wasn't excitable and could deal with wheelchairs and walkers and unexpected behavior?

It sure did. Hello, Simba.

So Bethany staffers went to Jud to train with Simba. It went well, but with a twist: a twist named Pups ... who was a cat.

Pups followed Simba and the Bethany folks wherever they went, because Pups and Simba were buddies. Pups in fact got his name because he preferred being with dogs rather than other cats.

So when Bethany obtained Simba, thanks to a grant from the Dakota Medical Foundation, it got Pups, too, for free. "He was a bonus," Mary Jo says.

Simba, in her new home, appeared to be a total flop at first because that's what she did best: She flopped down by Bethany's main entrance and rarely moved all day.

The staff wondered what good she was. The nurses, being nurses, did what comes naturally; they evaluated Simba, wondering if she was depressed or sick.

She was neither. "She was just lazy," Mary Jo says. "She just laid there. We'd spent good money for a lazy dog."

And it turned out she was perfect for the situation. Residents would pet her and they'd make her a conversation piece, reminiscing on when they had lazy pets.

For those in the memory care unit, she was special. “Residents there often have a sense of restlessness,” Mary Jo says; “they wonder if everything is OK. Then they come across this dog sleeping peacefully and they feel, ‘Well, there is nothing to worry about, she is relaxed, everything is fine.’ ”

Many people took care of Simba, feeding her, taking her outside to do her thing (an adventure in itself), giving her baths (“Not her favorite thing,” Mary Jo says). One resident, Jill Normes, gave her a massage with a back scratcher at 10 a.m. every day.

Simba was such a comfort, such a hit, that in 2002 veterinarian Dr. Tim Wahlen, West Fargo, nominated her for the North Dakota Veterinary Medical Association’s Companion Pet of the Year award, saying she “was a giver; she gives quietness where there is tension; she provides a stable fixture among so many unstable lives.” And she won.

She received the award during a ceremony in Minot. Was she excited when her name was called? Nah. “She was just sprawled out,” Mary Jo says. “They had to bring the award to her.”

Sadly, Tim wasn’t there to witness it. He’d died in a boating accident earlier that year.

Sadly, too, the saga of Simba recently came to an end.

She had developed breast cancer. Tests showed the tumor was spreading. It was terminal. So the wrenching decision was made, and the word passed through the rooms and corridors of Bethany; to spare her from suffering, Simba had to be put to sleep.

The day it was to happen, Feb. 29, Bethany’s social services office became the most visited place in the building. Simba was there, and Bethany’s residents and staff filed in to pet her one last time, to say goodbye. “There were,” Mary Jo says, “lots of tears.”

When Simba was taken to the van for the last ride to the veterinarian, a crowd awaited: residents, their families, staff members, volunteers, all to see her off, to pet her, to leave lipstick on her forehead from kisses.

Then she was gone.

Today, a Simba memorial center is inside Bethany’s main entrance. It includes pictures of her, a wreath, even flowers sent by Red River Hospice.

And there are notes from her Bethany “family”: “Simba was a loving, caring dog that touched many lives here at Bethany”; “She will never go out of Bethany Homes’ heart;” “I love you, Simba.”

The display also contains photos of other companion animals still at Bethany, including Simba’s old pal Pups, who used to knead Simba’s back with her paws and who now is adjusting to life without her, just as are all the folks at Bethany.

This was Simba, a lazy dog, sure, but one who represented calm, contentment and unconditional love to that species of beings known as humans.



Left: Bethany resident Jill Normes is shown giving Simba her daily massage. Right: A wreath with Simba's picture is in the memorial display for Simba at Bethany.

