

DR. JOEL GAVRIELE-GOLD

FOUR DAYS *in the LIFE...*

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SA CLINICAL Psychologist and Psychoanalyst in private practice for more than four decades, I was a pioneer in the unheard-of practice of using dogs in therapy. All of my dogs intuitively knew what patients needed. None of them received any training from me, although it was evident they passed on their knowledge to each other providing whatever was needed to attend to patients.

These past few years, I had two Bouvier des Flandres, Argos and Lulu. Argos was older by five years. They were a team in the office, meeting and greeting patients and taking turns attending to them. It appeared they each had their favorites. When Lulu was seven years old, she suddenly died from heart failure. No one was more shocked than Argos, who could not believe she was gone.

Argos grieved; he stopped eating and quickly lost 12 pounds. He frequently would make crying sounds and then lie down and sleep. His energy was draining and I was despairing. I phoned Bouvier Rescue over and over. Asking for an older female, I was told they almost never had females for adoption.

Finally, I got a call from Rescue saying they had a young female in Wisconsin. She was rescued from an abusive breeder. I received short videos of a young female running around in her foster family's backyard. I agreed to take her and hoped for the best. They had a volunteer who would meet me halfway outside of Cleveland. I left New York wondering what I was getting myself into. My vet said not to take Argos with me so that I would have time alone with Penny, whom I had already renamed to the French nickname of Trixie from Beatrix (one who brings joy).

At the arranged motel, I hardly slept. In the morning I received a phone call from the transport

driver a few miles from the motel. They arrived and Trixie got out, she pulled him, peed, and was ready to meet me. She sniffed me with no wish to know me better. The driver said she was very sweet, easy going and enjoyed the ride. We walked her together for quite a while. I paid and thanked him. He still writes to ask about her.

So Trixie headed to NY, another new home. She was very quiet sitting in the front seat, leaning as far away as possible against the window. We stopped at Burger King. I offered Trixie two plain burgers, which she gratefully accepted. About 8 hours into the trip, she lay down comfortably in the passenger seat, and by the time we hit the George Washington Bridge, her head was in my lap. We were making nice progress.

We got out of the car at my cabin. My neighbor, John, who was taking care of Argos, was waiting in the fenced-in backyard to meet Trixie. It was a beautiful moment. They instantly got along. I went into the house for a moment and returned to the yard to see the unlatched gate and Trixie running down the driveway by herself.

The horror of the moment was staggering. I felt like vomiting. I could not catch my breath due to my overpowering feeling of fear. I was stunned and horrified at what was happening. I jumped into my Toyota and raced down the 800-foot driveway only to spot her crossing the road and running, running, running.

I parked my car in the middle of the road, and as other cars stopped, I implored them to help me look for her. Many people got out, and some drove very slowly in the direction she had been running. I couldn't tell if she had chosen the road going up the mountain or continued straight to the highway toward the small village four miles away. All to no avail.

She was gone. I was devastated, so I tried to keep myself together. I found out there was a

town dog controller, Steve Budofskly. Luckily, he answered and came right over. He turned out to be an amazing guy who placed an all-points lookout alert.

He told me that even though the dog had been with me a short time, I should put the clothing I recently wore out along the driveway entrance and more clothes along the driveway going up to the house. (I'm still not sure if he was telling me this as a recovery possibility or, seeing the state I was in, he was giving me something to do to keep me occupied).

Steve told me to create a lost dog notice without mentioning a reward. The rescue shelter had sent videos of Trixie frolicking with other dogs in her foster home. I managed two shots off the video for the missing notice and had 200 printed. Neighbors helped put the notices in police and fire stations, post offices in surrounding towns, convenience stores, and every mailbox in town. I received two phone calls from nearby neighbors saying they had seen Trixie but could not get near her.

It was August, and it was unbearably hot on the third day she was missing. All I could think of was a dog getting hit by a car, starving, dying from heat stroke, without water. I kept bursting into tears of fear and worry. All this time thinking how stupid I was in those split seconds between feeling total joy and now followed by self-hatred, guilt, and despair. The pain was overwhelming.

It was now four days since Trixie was gone, and I had given up hope. Then, the phone rang, and a man said he found my dog. I asked him what color and he said brown. I said it's not my dog, she is black. He said, "Yes, yes, Wisconsin, Wisconsin." I knew it must be her because she was wearing Wisconsin tags. I asked for his address. He gave me his address, and I couldn't believe it. He was calling from a town twenty miles north of me. How could that be?

I called Steve and told him. He was not far from the caller. I was immediately on my way, wondering how she could have traveled so far and what kind of terrible shape she must be in. Steve called me - the dog was indeed Trixie. I arrived and met Luis, whose sister had found Trixie in their backyard. She was too exhausted to run from the kids and family. They were lovely people. I left with an exhausted dog but full of joy.

Trixie came back to Argos, and he stayed by her side. In the following days, I watched Trixie fall in love with Argos. While she was not connecting very much with me, not responding when I called her by name, not interested in eating without Argos by her side, barely interested in joining Argos and me at night. However, Argos was totally involved with her. He was ready for a new companion.

Trixie accompanied Argos and me to the office. Watching Argos attend to the patients, she learned to develop her own style of making contact with patients, and like all my other therapy dogs, she instinctively knew exactly what each patient needed.

When Argos was diagnosed with cancer, he was given three months to live. I didn't want him to suffer through treatment. He would live out what was left of his time with dignity. He managed to live eleven months and then failed rapidly.

Trixie was bereft. I had her by my side as we Buried Argos in the backyard along with LuLu's ashes. Once again, a best friend was lost, and now I had to be concerned about Trixie.

For many months, after burying Argos, Trixie refused to look at me. If I held her head in my hands, she would turn her eyes completely away from me. She said, "Why did you do this to me? He was my joy, and now I am alone with just you. You could never replace Argos." I ached for her. The only time she was herself and active was with patients.

One day, needing real contact from Trixie, I sat on the floor with her, held her head in my hands, and spoke to her. "Listen," I said, "we both miss him terribly, but we are together, and we will get through this together, and it will be OK." I couldn't stop crying, still holding her head she turned and looked directly in my eyes and licked my face. We were crying together for the first time.

I realized whatever abuse Trixie received as a puppy was compounded by having never had an opportunity to socialize and connect with humans. There is a critical developmental period in a dog's life when it learns to bond with humans and allows itself to become loving and domesticated in all the ways that bring dogs and people together.

Trixie had come home. ■