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A ROLE MODEL FOR THE HANDICAPPED



Pepper had only 3 legs – but her behavior belied her condition. She exuded a marvelous joie de vivre that was in sharp contrast to her disability. Soon after I met her I had an epiphany? What if a handicapped dog like Pepper were paired with a person who had some kind of disability? Could the canine serve as a mentor for the human? Let me tell you how a stray chow, the meltdown of a Wall Street corporate darling (think Lehman Bros. too big to fail), and Pepper got involved in a program to address this dream.

I'll start at the beginning, in 1983, when my path and Pepper's crossed.

I had brought my car into Gene's Garage for repairs. While waiting for the work to be completed, a beautiful red chow walked into the office. Gene complained that the dog had been hanging around for several days, apparently abandoned. He had contacted Animal Control earlier and was waiting for them to pick her up.

At that time the Humane Society was a kill shelter, and the chances of the chow getting adopted were slim. So, I decided to get permission from Shelter personnel to run, at my expense, a “Pet of the Week” article on her in the Boulder Camera.

When I arrived at the Shelter to photograph the chow for the newspaper article, I found her kenneled with Pepper, a 7 year old, 3 legged Australian shepherd, billed by the Shelter as the “Smiling Shepherd”. Sure enough, when I arrived Pepper displayed all of her teeth in a “smile”, which was probably more a gesture of extreme stress. After taking the chow’s photograph, I took Pepper for a walk. As soon as we hit the trail, Pepper exhibited an exuberance that was incredible. She ran with such abandon - totally unaware of her disability. I thought to myself Pepper could be a wonderful role model for some child who had also suffered an amputation. In that moment Pepper, the amputee, grabbed my attention along with the societal benefits she represented. **But what to do about it?**

Around the same time the huge conglomerate, Baldwin United, failed. Impacted by the meltdown were thousands of investors who had purchased single premium deferred annuities from the many insurance companies in the Baldwin United family. I was one of them. Fortunately, I had gotten a tip about the impending disaster from a bank officer, and withdrew my investment and thousands of dollars in accrued interest just before investor assets were frozen indefinitely. But I was left with a taxing problem. The IRS would tax the interest as ordinary income.

Happily, the Baldwin United meltdown converged with the Pepper epiphany. I thought to myself why not engage the Shelter to *study the feasibility* of offering a program that matched handicapped pets with handicapped people and fund it with the interest from the investment? I made the proposal to the Shelter. They quickly agreed to participate. However, a few days later I opened up the morning newspaper and was greeted with a headline on the front page that announced the program that I had tasked the Shelter to *investigate* had just gone live! Clearly, Shelter personnel and I were not on the same page. Nevertheless, public response to

the article was huge! The only problem was that people wanted to *OFFER* their pets to such a program, not adopt them.

In the days that followed, a professor on the faculty of the DU Business School and I attempted to give Shelter staff a quick lesson on how to proceed with an investigative study. I'd like to report that the study was successfully launched. But it wasn't. Mainly, I was pursuing a dream whose time had not yet arrived. The Shelter lacked the necessary infrastructure to offer such a program on an ongoing basis. To use Maslow's hierarchy of needs concept, the Shelter was operating in a survival mode. The Staff had no real choice in the decision – whether to discard the hard to adopt animal population, or salvage it. They simply lacked the resources to choose salvage.

But was all lost? I don't think so. I'd like to believe that critical seeds were sown. The newspaper article clearly raised community awareness of handicapped animals and their potential benefit to society. Also, participating in the project meetings were a few, young, new Shelter hires, who, years later, would totally transform the Shelter into the Humane Society of Boulder Valley and the model animal care facility that it is today. While the idea that I espoused focused on handicapped animals, the vision expanded in the shelter world over the years to include all animals – the handicapped, the elderly, the behaviorally challenged.

And what about Pepper? In my enthusiasm for the concept, I proposed that Pepper serve as the poster dog for the undertaking. I offered to keep her until such time as the program went live. In the end, Pepper spent the rest of her life with me as the *poster dog in waiting*, while managing with a firm paw the rest of my family– a flamboyant Labrador and two self entitled pussy cats.

As for the money intended for the project, the Shelter got to keep it. Better them than the IRS. In return they gave me the 1983 Humanitarian of the Year award. But more important, I'd like to think that the dream I attempted to implement contributed to a societal recognition that all living creatures have value that we must not waste.

