

GSD Therapy Dog on Rounds: Khese's Night on Hospital Duty

During my involvement with the Therapy Dogs of Vermont program over the past couple of years, I have witnessed the profound ability dogs possess to touch people often not engaged by other kinds of therapies. Perhaps this is because they offer themselves in way that speaks love and attention, living in the moment, they say to each patient "Right now, you are my focus, you are what is important".

I have witnessed these special canines offer themselves with boundless enthusiasm, great affection, and tremendous patience. Our dogs bring immense joy and comfort to the many people we serve. Tears dry. Frowns become smiles. Fear is forgotten, even if for a few moments. Inactive hands caress soft fur. Silence and isolation become a conversation of coos whispered in a dog's ear.

In our capacity as therapy dog volunteers, Khese and I often find ourselves in the midst of human drama—for a brief moment, becoming part of people's lives during the spectrum of experiences and emotions that take place at a city hospital. This is an amazing privilege for us. Join us on a Thursday night of rounds....

6:00pm, Main Lobby

As the therapy dogs assemble in the lobby of the hospital to ready themselves for rounds, a crowd draws round. The two German Shepherds who started the program over 10 years ago, Jordan and Lily, are being dressed; they wear a full set of hospital gear: scrubs, stethoscopes, beepers, and badges. This always elicits giggles and smiles from the folks who gather to watch.

I put Khese's therapy dog bandana around her neck and adjust her collar. The nearly all black German Shepherd is anxious to begin the night's work. As I talk with the other team members, a tiny figure with long blond hair approaches. Khese stands alert, curiosity and friendliness written all over her twitching eyebrows, pricked ears, tilted head, and wagging behind. Under my watchful eye, this little one plants a huge, smacking kiss on the side of Khese's neck and her tail does double time in return of the affection.

6:15pm, Pediatrics

Pedi is usually our first stop on rounds. Over the years, the therapy dogs have become a valued part of the pediatrics team. On this floor, our dogs have comforted the young terminally ill cancer patient, diverted a child's attention from his IV tubes and pain, motivated a bed-ridden teenager to walk, helped a toddler overcome his fear of dogs after a mauling, and even brought a 14-year old girl out of a coma.

While the other team members entertain children with tricks, Khese and I wander down the hallway. A nurse peeks her head out of a room and ushers us into a dark room. She pulls back a curtain, urging us toward a playpen. I am not prepared for what I see.

Inside, propped up by pillows and surrounded by a maze of tubes is a small child, her face so swollen, cut, and bruised. A ventilator protrudes from a hole in the front of her neck. Her rolling, dilated eyes don't seem able to focus on Khese, who is looking at this little creature through the mesh of the playpen. The nurse lowers the side of the playpen and Khese gently steps closer. The nurse takes the child's spastic hand and puts it on Khese's face. Khese, who can be a high-energy dog who is happiest when in constant motion, is uncharacteristically quiet. She stands like a statue while the nurse manipulates the



child's hand over her muzzle, to her soft shepherd ears, to the fluff of black hair on her chest. There is no way of knowing if the child is aware of Khese's presence.

7:15pm, ER

In ER, the team usually splits up, each escorted by a nurse to individual rooms in the heart of ER. It is imperative that our dogs be impeccably behaved and in control at all times. We are in the midst of scrambling emergency crews and chaos. It's crucial that dogs permitted to work here are calm and take the unexpected in stride.

The staff on this floor seem to welcome Thursday Therapy Dog night as much as their patients. Tonight we have a team entirely made up of German Shepherds. As the nurses play with the dogs, visitors and those patients who can leave their beds are roused by the jangle of dog tags and peek out into the hallway, amused by the scene.

Sometimes people shy away from German Shepherds, as their reputation as protection dogs often precedes them. My Khese can certainly look the part...she is nearly black, well-muscled and sleek, and often, her alert posture hints to an intensity that might be interpreted as piercing. But, if you look closer, you will see that her eyes are gentle, and her tail wags a friendly greeting.

One young doctor approaches Khese, a handful of graham crackers in his breast pocket. Though Khese is new to this tradition, Jordan and Lily sit in front of the doctor for a mid-shift snack.

Khese waits patiently for her turn. Much to her (and my), the doctor puts the graham cracker in his mouth and kneels in front of her. It doesn't take her too long to figure it out, and she reaches ever so gently to take the treat from his lips. Onlookers ask to do it again in order to snap some photos, but he's out of graham crackers. All I've got is a pocket full of dog treats. The doctor sticks a beefy dog snack between his pursed lips for Khese to take again. We all get a good laugh, and Khese wags her tail in agreement. (Note, for safety, this is not something that normally happens on therapy dog visits, and it should be discouraged. This was a one-timer 😊)



7:45pm, Surgical Recovery

Our last stop is surgical recovery. Oftentimes, we spend more time with the family members of patients than patients themselves, as they wait for loved ones to come out of surgery—a period sometimes fraught with apprehension. Tonight, Steve and Micro are talking quietly with a son awaiting his father's surgery outcome; Steve is holding 8-lb Maltese Micro, and leaning close to the young man, arm on his shoulder. Khese and I take a breather, and I ask her to down-stay in the hallway. Someone approaches me to ask about our therapy dog program. Khese suddenly sits bolt upright, ears erect; she rarely breaks a down stay, but she is up and tugging me toward a room a few doors down the hallway. We enter the room and nearly run smack dab into an armed police officer. I see he is in good company, with several other law enforcement types in the room. In the moment, I don't know what to make of them nor they, me. I look through the sea of blue to a hospital bed but can't see more than a few glimpses of a hospital blanket. I introduce myself. The man in the bed is moaning again. The officer says I can approach the bed to let him pat Khese, but that we need to be careful and not get too close. On the other hand, the officer is VERY close to us. Khese is straining to get to the bed now as the person is calling her to him. Next thing I know, Khese is pressing her head close to the bed rail bars, a large tattooed hand, stroking her ears gently. As I move closer I see that the large tattooed hand is handcuffed to the bedrail. The hand is attached to a very large

man who gently coos to Khese. He looks at her with such soft eyes and gentleness. She leans into his hand. They stay that way for some time and then we retreat. The man thanks me with a slight nod.

Night's End—The Lobby Again

The rest of the team has gone home and I am gathering my things from the closet behind the lobby's front desk. A few feet away, several rough-looking teens are whispering about Khese, who watches me in an alert, protective sit-stay. She's off duty, her bandana off—just a regular good old house dog again. They ask me, "Wow--is that a guard dog?" I say, "Nope, she's a therapy dog. You can pat her if you want." One brave soul steps toward her, his friends lingering at a safe distance in case he loses an arm. As I fish my keys out of my coat, there was my Khese, surrounded by the teens, who are sitting with her on the floor, cooing at her.

We say good night and walk to the car. Every week, our night ends the same way. Khese hops into the backseat of my little Honda. I remove her collar. "You are a good dog Khese" and I give her a pat. As we drive out of the parking lot, I offer her a treat. She falls fast asleep before we even leave the parking lot, peacefully tired and snoring loudly.



Khese was adopted at the age of five and began her therapy dog work about a year later. A nearly all-black Shepherd, she was expressive and boisterous, often silly and still puppy like.

Khese has since passed away, but we remember her as a remarkable, intuitive therapy dog who gravitated to terminally ill children, befriending them and making them her special little people. In her years as a therapy dog at FAHC Pediatrics, she comforted and said goodbye to many such children. Those who knew her also joked about her tendency to seek out those people most others avoided -- the homeless, the mentally ill, those in trouble with the law; she loved anyone in handcuffs and could win over even the most hardened, tattooed, angry individual. Her intelligence, personality, and spirit enriched our lives in so many ways, every day of her life.