

A GSD Therapy Dog at Work: Jordan and a Young Burn Survivor

The 30-minutes on the highway that took me from work to the hospital for therapy dog rounds afforded too much time to dwell on the day's aggravations. Feeling agitated, I stabbed the car's radio buttons, catching a blip of the local news—house fire, parents and a sibling dead, one survivor in pediatric intensive care... I was still out of sorts when we entered the hospital lobby. My partner, however, wasn't letting my mood dampen her fun. Jordan, a 12 year-old German Shepherd, bounced at my side in a silly puppy way that drew chuckles from onlookers. Most of my therapy dog partners have been German Shepherds. Though they can make superb therapy dogs, I have met with a good share of skeptics. Unlike small breeds, and the immediately likable, trustworthy face of a Golden retriever or lab, for some people, a Shepherd is not so easy to accept.

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Pediatrics Intensive care. Room 322. No admittance, only an observational window. A tiny body covered with angry blistering burns, mercifully masked beneath a total-body burn suit. Looking at the dwarfed form in the large hospital bed, I felt immediate shame. Nothing in my day had been that bad. A shepherd tail thumping against my leg brought me present and center again; Jordan looked up at me, impatient, "What are you waiting for? Let's get in there!" Two signs on the closed door: a red, bold warning "No visitors" and a bright pink heart with a name lettered on it, Emily.

For many months, four-year old Emily clung to life in intensive care—existing in a world of heavy sedation. Each week, we would peer into her room (due to infection risk, we could not enter); my teammate, Steve, would hoist 65-lb Jordan into his arms, holding her in Emily's window—with the remote hope that she could see the furry face, and know on some level that we were pulling for her.

Then one day, a new nametag on Emily's door. She had been moved to pediatrics to begin the long haul of healing. Still covered from head to toe in a burn suit, the pain must have been miles beyond excruciating. One of the toughest, most painful of these activities was simply getting out of bed and walking down the hallway.

Each week, using Jordan as motivation, the nurses had tried to coax Emily to take a few steps. Every week, this elicited shrieks of pain and confusion, eyes white and terrified through the slits of her bandage. Her little hands lashed out to push

everyone and everything away. Though I was thinking we'd never get any other response, Jordan was not to be deterred—each week wagging her tail as we made the customary first stop to Emily's room.



Jordan meets another young pediatric patient in a waiting room hospital.

One week, the ritual was broken. Something unbelievably wonderful and amazing was about to happen—something I had given up on but Jordan had not. When the nurse knelt down to ask Emily if she wanted to walk Jordan, a small bandaged hand reached out to take Jordan's leash from me. Unsteady, whimpering, Emily lurched forward, tugging Jordan out into the hallway, with me right there at their side. Wherever Emily wanted to go, Jordan stayed faithfully at her side. The unsteady child clung to the short leash (I was holding a longer leash for safety) as if it were a lifeline, occasionally, leaning into the black and tan German Shepherd's furry side for balance. They moved



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slowly down the hall together, visitors and staff coming out of the rooms to witness this beautiful journey.

Several times, Emily stopped, heaved a breath, and looked at Jordan, intently staring at her through the slits of her mask of as if she had never seen such a wondrous beast before--then she would gently touch Jordan's muzzle or ear. Jordan gazed at her with soft eyes. After these brief, wordless encounters, they would move on together. Given Jordan was getting up there in age, the slow pace was perfect for both of them.

If there any onlookers had been skeptical of the lovable, intuitive, affectionate, patient nature of the German Shepherd, they were believers on that day.

Jordan was one of the founding dogs of Therapy Dogs of Vermont. Jordan served as a therapy dog for 13 years—her life a shining example of how much an animal can accomplish in a lifetime. Jordan's life brought so many people immense joy and comfort. She is remembered for her love of tennis balls, French fries, vanilla ice cream, visiting the local hospitals dressed in scrubs, and tirelessly giving herself to anyone who needed a canine friend.

In 2002, Jordan passed away in my arms at the age of 14. She leaves an astounding legacy, as the work she began is carried out by hundreds of therapy dogs in Vermont and neighboring states.