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Tail-wagging gift proves therapeutic

By Bryan Painter

Gifts are a popular subject right now so let's talk about one Tracy Hightower received.

The gift was walking and wagging, not wrapped. The gift just appeared from up the road as she went to visit her parents' house the day after her birthday in October 2006.

But she is so proud of this gift that she shares it.

She shares the gift with those in an assisted living center, as a reading education assistant at one school and as a boost of encouragement and laughter for children facing various challenges.

Many would say this is an unlikely gift. But to Hightower, this gift is one of the best she's ever received.

The gift is Phoebe, a pit bull terrier she guesses is about 3 years old. What she isn't left guessing about is whether Phoebe has been a success as a therapy dog.

Let me give you a little background.

John Clanton, a staff photographer here at *The Oklahoman*, met Hightower one day while working on an assignment that included Volunteers for Animal Welfare as a source. She mentioned how she was going to train Phoebe as a therapy dog and he began taping segments of them during training at Full Circle Obedience and during visits as a therapy dog. Pit bulls have made the news often

What interested me is why Hightower considers Phoebe "a gift that was meant to be" and why she desired to share that gift.

"The payoff for me is that I love it and I feel good about what we're doing and my dogs enjoy it," she said of the therapy.

Before meeting Phoebe

Notice she said dogs. When asked how she got interested in the therapy, Hightower told me about Piper, a brindle boxer-possibly-whippet mix.

"I wanted to be more involved with my dogs, do agility or do something fun, obedience contests or something like that," she said. "Then I heard some people talk about therapy at Full Circle and I just thought, well, that's a great idea because it's something that I can do with my dog that benefits someone else."

That's why she became involved in Volunteers for Animal Welfare about five years ago and then joined the board about three years ago. She began volunteering when the group was at the Oklahoma City animal shelter. Their primary function when she first joined the group was that of handling the shelter's adoption program. And as part of that, once each quarter, they were spaying and neutering about 100 to 150 animals.

Last year, they opened the clinic not far from the Oklahoma River and through early December have spayed and neutered about 7,900 animals since opening, including more than 5,600 this year.

The executive director of the group asked if anyone would be interested inserving on the board of the Oklahoma Humane Federation, which includes "dealing with legislation stuff." She said she would because "I'm interested in getting into the legislative side of the puppy mills and the breed specific stuff and doing whatever I can in that way."

On Oct. 27, 2006, she got a call from the executive director, who said she had been selected for the board.

The next day she drove over to her parents "and when I pull up in the driveway I see this little black Phoebe.

"She just met us there."

Hightower placed a "found ad," looked for "lost ads" and put a "found notice" up at PetSmart. But most importantly she took Phoebe home for what she thought was a temporary stay.

She enrolled Phoebe in training at Full Circle Obedience and that led to the dog taking the Canine Good Citizen and Therapy Dog Training tests and passing both. She said, "I just fell in love with her" and she felt exposing Phoebe to others would provide multiple benefits.

Showing love

Do people become wide-eyed when you walk in with a pit bull terrier?

"People in the assisted living centers don't have that prejudice," she said. "Pit bulls were one of the most popular dogs after World War II. So a lot of people grew up having these dogs on their farms. What we see in the nursing homes is that they'll just say 'Oh what a sweetie.'"

At Ranchwood Elementary, Phoebe is among the pets certified by Therapy Dogs International participating in a children reading to dogs program.

So Hightower, received what she believes was a gift, then she decided to share it and now that experience is yet another gift to her.

I'll close with an example.

On Halloween she took Phoebe to visit some children at a center. And because it was Halloween the dog was dressed up in a little Harley-Davidson outfit with a leather hat and her "Ladies of Harley" bandana and little jacket.

"Those kids thought she was just the cutest thing and they said, 'Oh I'm so glad you brought this dog, she's made our day,'" Hightower said.

Did you cry?

"Not that day," she said. "But I am now, just thinking about it."

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