

Leo: An Act of Kindness Rescues a Voice

Excerpted and adapted from *"Sophie... best friends are forever"*, written by Ted Slupik

For almost four years, my wife and I had visited my mother-in-law "Nana", now age 92, several times a week in the Alzheimer's wing of a local skilled nursing facility where she lived. As Sophie (our Rough Coated Collie) was a Certified Therapy Dog, we would usually take her with us and we would walk through the activity room on the Alzheimer's unit to greet all the patients who were sitting there. This nursing home made it a policy to get all the patients out of their rooms every day, to help them socialize and communicate. Most of the patients never had any visitors. Sophie would introduce herself to a patient by standing and waiting until she was acknowledged before moving on to the next patient. Sophie was usually able to provoke some type of response (pet, smile, and laugh), even from patients who did not normally inter-react with staff or others.

An unusual event happened this particular day as we were walking Sophie through the activity room while the patients watched television. An elderly man in a wheelchair was sitting in a far corner. He made eye contact with Sophie and began to pat his leg and said "here girl" to call her to him. Sophie noticed him and slowly started to walk towards him. He continued calling "here girl" until Sophie got close enough and sat down next to him so that he could pet her. This man, who we later learned was named Leo, asked, "Dog name?" We told him "Sophie". Leo spoke in bro-



Sophie

ken sentences for a couple minutes and seemed to really enjoy the visit. Sophie intently watched and listened to Leo as he haltingly spoke very softly. She continued to nudge him until he responded back.

After we were done visiting all of the patients in the activity room, we left to go down the hall to visit with Nana in her room, which was at the far end of the hallway. Upon exiting the activity room, you were required to pass the nurses' station for the floor. There was a couple (man and woman) standing and talking to the charge nurse. As we walked closer to the couple, we noticed that they were crying. We asked whether there was anything we could do to help. The woman answered, "No, you've already done something to help." Asking what she meant, she explained that, Leo, the man in the wheelchair, was her

father. He had been at the nursing facility on the Alzheimer's care floor for almost six months.

Today was the first day he spoke!

What we thought were tears of sorrow were actual tears of joy. Whatever that brief encounter with Sophie did to remind Leo of something a long time ago which got him to speak was a wonderful thing. We had thought someone had died when we first saw the couple at the nurse's station and it turned out to be a very happy moment for Leo and his family. Although he never became a great conversationalist during his remaining time at the nursing home, Leo was able to communicate and respond to staff if he needed some type of help. Through this simple form of communication, Leo was reunited with his family and able to speak to staff members

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Sam in a down.

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The security guards at the apartments used to stare when I would take Sam to the gravel area via elevator because of the ice at the courtyard. You could just tell they were dying to say something but didn't. I was defensive when it came to Sam.

Sometimes Sam would look into my eyes and I would stroke his head. This dog went from not wanting to come near me to tucking his head into me when he was scared and leaning into me and wagging his tail when I patted his back.

Then, things started happening. He started losing control of his bladder and bowels in the hall and becoming disoriented. I found him in the walk-in closet one day shaking so we had to start shutting that door. I would show him where his bed was.

I didn't think I would become attached to him. But when you see a dog as much as I saw Sam, how could I not be?

I knew the day would come that I would get the text or email that Sara had made the decision to have Sam put to sleep. I also had a fear that one day I would go over there and turn the key in the lock and call out to Sam only to see a note telling me he was gone.

It was on a Sunday when I got the email during the Oscars telling me that Sam had been pacing back and forth, panting, not able to catch his breath. He had been having panting episodes for awhile. Sara said she had made the difficult decision to let him rest. He would've been 14.

I had clients who had lost pets before and it upset me but not like this. Even though I knew it was the right thing just like in 2012 when I had to do the same with my 15 1/2-year-old dog, Ripley; it still got me.

I thought about Sam for a long time and it was weird that whole week not to be going over there. I recently pet sat for a dog named Bruce Willis who has arthritis and the way his back legs splayed out reminded me of Sam.

I remember my first overnight visit with Sam. I didn't know how it would go because of his health, but it was fine. He was just snoring away and it was a comfort to me.

I woke up from a nap one night after hearing about the plan to have Sam put to sleep. In the dream I was crying and crying about my boyfriend who died in 2005.

When I woke up there was an outline of a dog standing on my side.

Crazy, I know. 🐾

which I'm sure made his day to day life at the facility better.

It was amazing that after assuming the worst and being sad to experiencing a moment of joy, all delivered by Sophie.

We would see Leo many other times. It was almost as if he knew we were coming because we always seemed to find him sitting in his wheelchair by the elevator waiting to welcome Sophie. One time that we saw him after our first visit, my wife asked him if he would like to give Sophie a "cookie" (our word for dog biscuit). He shook his head enthusiastically and my wife gave Leo a Milk-Bone, but apparently something got lost in the translation. That day Leo had a Milk-Bone for his dessert. Leo thought it was his cookie.

Another amazing thing Leo would do when he first saw Sophie get off the elevator, was to follow her down the hall in his wheelchair, peddling with his feet as fast as he could to keep up with or catch up to Sophie so he could talk to her. This type of exercise was exactly what the nurses tried to get Leo to do many times on his own. Although not willing to exercise for the staff, he was always willing to do it to see Sophie for a longer period of time and he got his exercise this way twice a week. Leo never learned my name or my wife's name but he certainly remembered Sophie every time we came to visit. Leo lived several more years, and we have Sophie to thank for giving him back the ability to communicate with family, friends, staff, and yes, with Sophie. The family was eternally grateful for a visit with a dog named Sophie and that act of kindness which changed everything. 🐾