

CANINE CHRONICLES

by Richard D. Lieberman and Quincy

When I first saw the ad in the *Montgomery Gazette*, I realized the potential of the Jewish Social Service Agency (JSSA) hospice program. It was a wonderful community service opportunity for both me and my dog. My 2-year-old French poodle was the perfect dog to accompany me on visits to hospice patients. He was handsome, calm, and loved people. However, I wasn't sure if I would be able to deal emotionally with people who were about to die.

I soon learned that a hospice patient is one who has been diagnosed as terminally ill with a life expectancy of six months or less, and the patient has chosen to receive hospice care rather than curative care. What I didn't know was that many hospice patients have a lot of life and emotion left in them. I was about to learn.

After I completed two days of training at JSSA, I took Quincy to People Animals Love ("PALs") for his training. He wasn't to become a true service dog but he had to learn to get along with other dogs and to be kind and gracious to patients in beds, walkers and wheelchairs. Quincy passed with flying colors and within a week we started our visits. We had just two patients at first but over the past three years have expanded our visits to about nine patients every Wednesday. And the experience was incredibly rewarding for Quincy, for me, and for the patients.

Here are some vignettes from our visits:

What do you do with a hospice patient: Many hospice patients are no different from other patients. They are interested in conversation, they have feelings, they value Quincy's company and love to pet his soft fur. Others, in a more advanced stage, may just pet Quincy but not talk. I try to read poems and stories to the patients and show them how Quincy can catch a ball in his mouth. With Quincy at their feet, we play Bingo, "Name that Tune," "Fill In the Word," and sing together. But mostly, we just talk and I try to comfort and relax them. (See picture below).

Elizabeth Taylor's jewels: We were visiting an assisted living facility that had a large double sliding glass entrance door that opened electronically. Quincy always leads when we walk, and he activated the door and walked in like he owned the place. I later heard this story from someone who had been standing inside, discussing "jewels of the stars," with some of the residents. In particular, they were talking about Elizabeth Taylor's beautiful and elegant jewelry, including the 68 carat Taylor-Burton diamond. Just as Quincy pranced in, one of the ladies looked at him and said "Is that Elizabeth Taylor's dog?" The perfect comment for a debonair white French poodle!

Music therapy: Many assisted living facilities use music therapy. Sometimes singers sing well-known tunes, frequently with electronic backups. But the best music therapy was given by a woman who played guitar and had a book with the words of favorite oldies in large type. The patient chose a song and then sang the first verse with the music therapist. It always brought a smile to everyone present.

Two Men in her later life: My patient celebrated her 99th birthday with friends, volunteers from the facility and volunteers from JSSA. Quincy and I attended the birthday party, told stories, and sang songs. A few months later, I attended the patient's memorial celebration of her life without Quincy (thinking it might be disrespectful to bring him). The patient's daughter told us about her mother's life and loves. The best part was when she said there were two men in her later life. The first man befriended her in this facility and encouraged her get out of bed and participate in many activities. The second man was Quincy whom she loved. I realized what a mistake it had been to leave Quincy at home that day. At least she had seen Quincy and happily petted him shortly before she died.

Singing with her granddaughter: My patient was 89 years old and always spoke to Quincy in French. (After all, he is a *French* poodle). She adored Quincy and couldn't get enough of him. She was always very active but one day when we arrived, she was bedridden. The next time we saw her, she was sitting in a chair, singing a duet in French with a younger woman. It was adorable. I learned that the younger woman was her granddaughter and that she had sung this same song with her grandmother when she was a little girl.

Quincy's picture: One of my patients began to attend a painting group at the facility. A kind instructor provided materials and a supply of beautiful pictures the patients could copy. My patient wanted to paint Quincy, so I brought in a photograph of him. The instructor outlined both the dog and the background, and the patient completed a portrait of him on canvas with a little help from the instructor and me. You can see both the photo and the painting below.

What dogs can do: Whenever I find a book or an article about military dogs or service dogs, I read it aloud to my alert patients. It may be the story of the Belgian Malinois, Mike, who detected thousands of pounds of explosives for U.S. special forces in Iraq, or Moxie, a black Labrador that alerts her diabetic owner to low blood sugar by smelling her breath, or Daisy and Tangle, who can detect the unique odor of bladder cancer cells in urine. There are so many other wonderful stories about dogs that my patients loved to hear, and I try to read them all.

The Doctor likes show tunes: One of my patients was a former surgeon. I first met him in the computer room of a facility, watching "The Sound of Music." Realizing how much he liked show tunes, I found YouTube videos of musicals and he, his daughter and I sang the tunes together in his room. A few months later, the doctor's younger daughter returned from overseas to be with him and her sister during his last few days. The older daughter asked me to play some of the show tunes again and the three of us sang for him.

There are so many stories from these patients, including the ones they tell us and the ones we tell them. They get great comfort just from petting Quincy's soft fur coat. It's not only what volunteers give to the patients, it's what the patients also give to the volunteers. There is a real connection and a real sharing. JSSA's Hospice Program is truly rewarding for everyone involved.



Quincy with a typical patient



Quincy's portrait painted by a patient