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SICK DOG GETS DOSE OF GOODWILL

By Danielle Torricelli

On a normal day, Daniel Torres, 44, spends time on his patio in Claremont tending to his favorite hobby, growing and cultivating bonsai trees, while his loyal service dog, Cuervo Gold, keeps him company, enjoying the outdoors as much as her owner. But the past year has been anything but normal for this pair.

Over a year ago, Cuervo was diagnosed with nasal osteosarcoma. A cancerous bone tumor had developed in her nasal passages, causing nosebleeds and general nasal leakage. The tumor ultimately began to hinder her breathing.

Mr. Torres and Cuervo, an American pit bull terrier, have a relationship far closer than an average pet and pet owner.

When Mr. Torres was two years old, a bout of polio caused his legs to be immobile and his arms not fully functional. The illness has since confined Mr. Torres to a wheelchair. As an adult, and 25-year Claremont resident, Mr. Torres has tried to live as independently as possible. But when the opportunity of having a service dog presented itself, forces beyond Mr. Torres's control took over.

In 1991, Mr. Torres's friend's pit bull had a litter of puppies. Whenever Mr. Torres spent time at his friend's house, one puppy in particular would continually crawl under his manual wheelchair. The two-month-old puppy's devotion got to the point where she would scale a chain-link fence in order to climb into Mr. Torres's car as he left his friend's home. At that point, Mr. Torres's friend gave him the dog.

When Mr. Torres put the puppy on a leash to go for a walk to the store and the puppy pulled him the entire distance, Mr. Torres knew that their partnership was meant to be.

"It was love at first sight," Mr. Torres said.

He named the puppy Cuervo Gold because she is golden from head to toe—in color and personality.

Seeing the potential in Cuervo, Mr. Torres wanted to have her formally trained so she could be a service dog, which, like a seeing-eye dog, would guarantee her entrance to wherever Mr. Torres needed to go. Unable to afford formal training, which can run up to the several thousand dollars, Mr. Torres contacted friends who had been dog trainers to have Cuervo trained properly.

Cuervo proved to be as apt a pupil as Mr. Torres thought, and quickly took to the training. She learned how to fetch, retrieve and perform other duties that would assist Mr. Torres in his daily life, such as answering the telephone.

After going through basic and advanced training, Mr. Torres took Cuervo to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Pomona, where she was granted full service dog status.

Mr. Torres and Cuervo work as a team, going to the store, riding the bus and going to nurseries together.

“We like to get out and socialize,” Mr. Torres said.

As a person with a disability, Mr. Torres is frequently observed in public with curiosity. When he is with Cuervo, many barriers that have been automatically erected are broken down as people approach to pet Cuervo.

“When I’m out without her, there is definitely a [social] barrier”, Mr. Torres said. “She has helped me meet a lot more people.”

After over 14 years of being a team, Mr. Torres and Cuervo have been through a lot together.

“She’s a part of our family,” said Angie Armenta, Mr. Torres’s older sister.

“She’s been an excellent companion to Danny.”

For Mr. Torres, whose primary income comes from disability checks, the cost of Cuervo’s treatment has been a heavy burden to bear. Last April, when Cuervo had a procedure to stop her nose bleeds, Mr. Torres was saving money wherever he could, literally picking up pennies off of the ground to accumulate as much money as possible.

Cuervo recovered well after that procedure, but about 4 months later, the symptoms resurfaced. A lump began to manifest in her nasal passages, seriously hindering her breathing. Cuervo’s veterinarian, Dr. Craig at the Veterinary Surgical Specialists in Tustin, prescribed a CT scan to determine what could be done about the tumor.

At \$1300, the CT scan was financially out of Mr. Torres’s reach. Unable to get financial assistance from the surgical specialist or a cancer group, a woman who worked in the same building as Cuervo’s veterinarian told Mr. Torres about a group called Canine Cancer Awareness (CCA).

A nonprofit, online-based organization, CCA began in 2001 by pet owners who had lost dogs to cancer. Linda Derosier started the organization with someone she met at an online support group for people who had dogs with cancer. Deciding that something should be done about it, CCA was created as a resource on canine cancers. It also provides assistance for cancer treatment funding for dogs.

Donations can be made to specific dogs on the website, but the organization’s main funding comes from the sales of their bracelets and other logo products.

Over a month ago, Mr. Torres applied for—and received— financial assistance from that organization, along with funds from Orthodogs’ Silver Lining Foundation (OSLF), another nonprofit organization that provides financial assistance for service dogs with cancer. OSLF became involved in Mr. Torres and Cuervo’s situation after seeing their picture and information on CCA’s website.

“It’s so nice to be able to do something like this for someone,” said Linda Derosier, president and co-founder of CCA.

“CCA has pledged \$1000 toward Cuervo’s treatment,” Ms. Derosier said. With over \$500 of online donations made through CCA’s website, and the balance most likely to be covered by OSLF, the cost of Cuervo’s treatment is covered.

“It was very much a joint effort [between CCA and OSLF],” Ms. Derosier said.

After finding out that, through contributions, the financial burden was off of his shoulders, Mr. Torres said that it “made me want to stand up and jump for joy.”

“It has renewed my faith in people and humanity,” Mr. Torres said.

About two weeks ago, Cuervo was taken in for an emergency debulking, removing as much of the tumor as possible, without having done a CT scan.

Cuervo is doing well, but is not able to perform all of the tasks she used to do, since her mouth is her tool, and it's difficult for her to breathe through her nose.

"If I do drop something, she'll want to pick it up, but she can't," Mr. Torres said. "I know this buys us a little bit of time, every moment is precious."