

Groups Unleash Love to Ease Pain of High Vet Bills

Owners unable to pay for care turn to a network of donors who understand their need.

By CARLA HALL
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The first time Daniel Torres saw the puppy, she had scampered under his wheelchair. He had worked hard not to let the crippling polio he contracted as a toddler constrain his life. But by his late 20s he was bound to his wheelchair.

On a visit to a friend's home, Torres played with the puppy, one of two that his friend was raising. Torres looped the dog's leash around his leg and took her for a walk to a nearby store.

Rather, she took him. "She pulled me the entire way," Torres said. "I thought, 'Wow this is amazing. We got here in no time.'"

Whenever Torres visited his friend, he would play with the puppy, and each time he started to leave, the puppy would run to his car. "If you like her, why don't you just take her?" his friend offered.

Torres appraised the golden coat and eyes of the American Staffordshire terrier and immediately knew what he would name her. Cuervo Gold. "Cuervo Gold Torres."

That began a bond that has lasted nearly 15 years between Torres, 44, and Cuervo, who has been not just her owner's companion but his service dog as well. The polio left Torres unable to raise his arms and stiffened his fingers.

But now it's Torres' turn to take care of Cuervo.

A year ago, Cuervo was diagnosed with nasal osteosarcoma — a bone cancer that invaded her nasal area — and began undergoing treatment and surgeries.

On a recent morning, Cuervo followed alongside Torres as he wheeled himself across the grass to his ground-floor apartment in Claremont.

Cuervo is no longer the energetic dog who once fetched Torres' keys and brought him the cordless phone when it rang. Now, Cuervo's gait is slow. Her drug cocktail of Benadryl, steroids and antibiotics leaves her lolly.

The left side of her snout is swollen by a tumor that continues to grow and press on her



GINA FERAZZI/Los Angeles Times

BEST OF FRIENDS: Daniel Torres incurred more than \$5,000 in vet bills when his dog, Cuervo Gold, was diagnosed with cancer. Two online organizations, Canine Cancer Awareness and Orthodogs' Silver Lining Foundation, helped him with the hardship.

teeth. Her left eye is clouded with what Torres says is a cataract. "It's probably a little selfish on my part, but I think she would rather be here with me," Torres says, gently scratching her back. "I can only speculate."

But the price of Torres' devotion is high. In the last year, he has incurred more than \$5,000 in veterinary bills. Torres, who has worked at a variety of jobs, the last of which was at a computer-aided drafting shop, lives on a disability check of roughly \$1,100 a month.

But when the growth in her nose returned last fall and her breathing became labored, there was a new round of veterinary bills.

He started to borrow from friends. "They said, 'Don't worry about it, it's for Cuervo.'"

Meanwhile, Torres had heard about the nonprofit group Canine Cancer Awareness, which operates a website with information about canine cancers, shares stories of owners in need of funds for their cancer-stricken animals and makes monetary grants to pay for cancer treatments. He applied for funding. "I

thought anything would help," he says.

The day after Cuervo was hospitalized for treatment, Torres learned he had been approved for funding.

"Oh my goodness, it was like I had won the lottery," Torres said. "I was finally able to get a good night's sleep."

Torres and his dog got help from two online organizations, Canine Cancer Awareness (www.caninecancerawareness.org) and Orthodogs' Silver Lining Foundation (www.oslf.org).

Canine Cancer Awareness is a nonprofit organization based in Maine. The Silver Lining Foundation is headquartered in Oklahoma and has applied for nonprofit status.

Canine Cancer Awareness offers funding for dogs in cancer treatment.

The Silver Lining Foundation — started last year by people who got to know one another in an online support group for owners of dogs with orthopedic illnesses — offers assistance mostly for dogs with orthopedic problems but also funds service dogs like Cuervo, with other

kinds of medical conditions.

Both groups are essentially based on the proposition that as heartbreaking as it is to have a seriously ill dog, it's even more heartbreaking not to be able to afford treatment for the animal.

"A lot of the guilt that owners feel is, 'I had to put my dog down because I didn't have enough money to take care of it,'" said Linda Desrosier, president of Canine Cancer Awareness. "It's hard enough to deal with a dog with cancer."

The organizers of the Silver Lining Foundation had dogs with orthopedic problems and shared their travails on an Internet support group called Orthodogs.

"We all had been through at least one surgery with our dogs," said Brenda Osbourne, a cancer research data coordinator who lives in Owasso, Okla., who started the group, and now functions as its treasurer.

"We were fortunate we had the finances for our dogs. But every now and then someone would come on the site, saying their dog needed surgery and they really, really needed

money," Osbourne said.

Desrosier, who lives in Litchfield, Maine, co-founded Canine Cancer Awareness after her own Lab-hound mix, Fluke, was diagnosed with cancer in 2002. She estimates she spent about \$5,000 on his care before he died in 2003.

Before these groups came along, Desrosier said, the most that pet owners could expect from a handful of assistance organizations was in the tens of dollars.

Cancer treatments for dogs can cost thousands, depending on the type and location of the disease: "It could very well and easily go way up to \$15,000," she said.

Donations to Canine Cancer Awareness average between \$20 and \$50, Desrosier said, but some are as large as \$200. "It's mostly people who have been affected with cancer in their dogs' lives and are sometimes still fighting cancer," she said.

Both websites post pictures and stories of dogs in need and allow people to donate funds earmarked for particular dogs.

Each group requests statements from the treating veteri-

narians and verifiable income information from the dogs' owners.

Desrosier doesn't like to set a specific income level for applicants with canine cancer medical bills.

"If you're the owner of a dog with cancer and need help, please apply," she said. But Desrosier warns, if vet bills are going unpaid because Saturday night entertainment is more important, don't bother making a request. "We want to make sure it's a financial hardship, not a personal hardship," she said.

Between Canine Cancer Awareness and the Silver Lining Foundation, Cuervo's bills will probably be completely covered. Torres says Cuervo's second surgery bill was about \$2,100. Canine Cancer Awareness has already paid \$1,000 toward Cuervo's bill. The foundation has paid \$1,100.

The type of cancer Cuervo has is almost always fatal. "Osteosarcoma is not a disorder that can be cured in any form in dogs," said Anthony Cambridge, the veterinarian who performed the latest surgery on Cuervo. "In general, when surgery is directed at that type of disorder it is to improve quality of life in the short term, it's about trying to improve comfort."

Desrosier said the prognosis is not taken into account when Canine Cancer Awareness determines funding.

"To us, it doesn't matter," she said. "Every day is so precious and it's a gift, especially where a dog like Cuervo has spent her life serving Daniel. So we feel if we can compassionately help, we will."

No one needs to tell Torres the days are precious. "Cuervo doesn't have that much longer to go," Torres said as he watched her in his apartment.

As a result, he rarely wants to leave her. And he's careful where he takes her lest her sinuses become irritated. "I don't take her places where it's dusty."

He empties a can of Vienna sausages into a bowl. "Want a goodie?" he asks Cuervo, then adds, "I try to give her a soft treat." He puts the bowl in front of her. She gingerly picks up the sausages but easily downs them all.

"Just keeping her happy and comfortable is my main concern," he says. "I'm not trying to have her do a lot for me — OK, Cuervo, you've been there all your life for me. These are your golden years."