

# Luna

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When I adopted my dog Luna in 2021, my family and I immediately benefited from her sweet and caring spirit, but we didn't know that with time and training she would learn to comfort many members of our community. I adopted Luna when she was nine months old, and since she is a pyredoodle, half pyrenees and half poodle, she was already quite large. She could take up almost the entire length of my couch when she laid down, but that didn't stop her from constantly cuddling up with anyone who sat down! Since she was so big, about 70 pounds and two and a half feet tall, I was worried that if she got excited and jumped on someone that she would knock them down. Fortunately, we quickly learned that no matter how excited she is, Luna never jumps on anyone.. She also never barked or growled. She loved everyone we met on walks and at the dog park. Luna had never met a stranger because she became fast friends with everyone she met. With this in mind, I began to look for an opportunity to use her talents when I found a non profit organization called Pet Partners where I began to learn of the many benefits of pet therapy.

“Pet Partners is the national leader in demonstrating and promoting animal-assisted therapy, activities, and education. With thousands of dedicated volunteers and their pets, our Therapy Animal Program touches a variety of clients in the U.S. and abroad, including veterans with PTSD, seniors living with Alzheimer's, students with literacy challenges, patients in recovery, people with intellectual disabilities, and those approaching end of life. Pet Partners therapy animals provide affection, comfort, and relief to community members who need it most.”

“Research shows that positive interactions with animals increase the hormones associated with blood pressure regulation, pain relief, stress relief, and joy. Visits from therapy animal teams can normalize stays away from home for hospital patients, improve motivation to participate in treatment protocols, and lessen worry, anxiety, unhappiness, and pain.”

I had found the perfect place to use Luna's caring spirit to bring joy to others, so we began training for our therapy animal place in 2022. We began training for basic obedience such as sit, stay, leave it, lay down, etc. The test to be a therapy animal team was two fold: personality and obedience. I had no worries about her passing the personality test, so once we finished our obedience class we were ready for our test.

For the personality portion, the animal evaluators go through a series of exercises to see if she would react negatively to any situations. The personality test included: the evaluator touching her paws, tail, and mouth, receiving a full body hug, walking past another dog without reacting, walking through a crowd without reacting, letting someone yell then pet her, multiple people surrounding and petting her at once, and having someone talk to me while ignoring her. Throughout these tests, her objective was to not react in any way, which she did with flying colors. She is unfazed by distractions and happy when anyone is petting her, even if it is four strangers all at once! Any aggressive barking or growling as well as nervous behavior such as whining or tucking her tail would have suggested to the evaluators that she was unfit to be a therapy animal. Then we had the obedience test which included: sit, stay, lay down, wait while I walk away, and leave a toy untouched on the ground next to her. She was one point away from a perfect score on obedience because during sit and wait she got up one second too early to come back to walk back to me. We passed our test on the first try and I was so excited to start volunteering and bringing comfort and joy to those who need it.

During our first visit to Children's Medical Center Dallas, Luna was a star and the kids were overjoyed to see her. I would knock on the patient's doors to ask if they wanted a therapy dog to visit them and their faces immediately lit up as they saw Luna's head poke around the door. Luna would jump on the bed and cuddle with them as I talked to them and their family. I could see the relief that the parents had to see that their hospitalized child was smiling and conversing. On that first day, a teary eyed mother told me that her young child had recently been diagnosed with cancer and this was the first time she had seen him smile in a week. I began to realize how impactful and meaningful it is to the patient's and their family's to be visited by a therapy dog. I also began to understand how fulfilling and rewarding this experience would be for me.



After that first visit, Luna and I went to a variety of locations to bring joy to people including nursing homes, elementary schools, rehabilitation centers, and libraries. The more we volunteered the clearer it became to me that this is important work and that we were truly improving other people's days with our visits. I had volunteered at many places by myself in the past, but by bringing my dog with me I saw an entirely different kind of impact that was deeper and more profound than I expected. One of my favorite places to visit is a rehabilitation center for traumatic brain injuries. We visit this location every other week and everytime we walk in we get a warm welcome from all of the patients and caregivers as they are counting down the days until they see Luna again. During one visit at this facility, we went to a speech therapy session with a patient who was unable to form many words. She was petting Luna as her speech therapist pronounced Luna repeatedly. The patient began to make the "L" sound and with a few tries was able to say Luna's name! The speech therapist and I became so excited as we all celebrated the patient learning a new word together. Another visit we had was with a patient with decreased extremity strength and difficulty speaking. We joined her for her occupational therapy session where she was practicing laying on her stomach and using her arms to push up. Luna jumped on the bed to cuddle with her during her exercises. The therapist began to prompt her to say, "Hi Luna!" The patient was watching Luna and trying to speak when suddenly she said, "Hi Luna," and Luna turned her head to look at her. The patient began to laugh and said her name again! This repeated multiple times to where the patient was almost crying with laughter.



The therapist and I were witnessing this joyful interaction when she said to me, “She has a very hard time during rehab and often cries during these sessions, so seeing her laugh and smile is priceless.” I felt so fulfilled because I knew I was making a difference in these patient’s lives, which is priceless to me.

These experiences have taught me how to be more compassionate and caring to all I meet. After seeing people going through intense pain and stressful treatments, I have become more in tune to the emotions of others. I feel that I have grown in my social skills, understanding, and empathy. I believe the kind of personal development that I have gone through can only be achieved by serving others. So much of our lives are fueled by our own wants and needs, but by making a dedicated effort to put others first, I have found fulfillment and a new perspective on life.

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We go on therapy visits at least twice a week and they are consistently the highlight of my week. I have never been so excited to volunteer until I became a therapy animal handler. I feel I have a stronger purpose than ever before to bring joy to others and improve their daily lives through pet therapy. I knew how much coming home to a happy dog lifted my spirits, but when I was training Luna to become a therapy dog, I didn’t understand how powerful and beneficial it would be for patients to see her. Now I tell everyone I meet who has a calm spirited pet that they should train their pet to be a therapy animal. I have seen and felt first hand how impactful pet therapy is and I want others to spread the joy of pet therapy and feel the fulfillment of bringing some sunshine to someone when they are in the midst of some of their darkest days.

If you believe that pet therapy would be a good fit for you, I encourage you to go to [petpartners.org](https://petpartners.org) and begin your volunteering journey. Finding my volunteering niche has been the best thing I have done for my personal growth and for my community, and I believe that it will be the same for you. If you don't think pet therapy is for you, I encourage you to find your own niche in volunteering. By taking the time to put others first, you will in turn become a happier and more whole human being. We all have something to contribute to this world, we just have to find it.



Sources:

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