

Darlene

By Sara Mark, D.V.M.

For three years, my dog, Pokey, and I worked side-by-side as volunteers in the Prescription Pet Program at The Children's Hospital in Denver. I often referred to Pokey as a "terror" instead of a terrier because in those younger days, she was a perpetual motion machine. The only time she was different was during our hospital visits, and then she seemed to find some inner force that made her behave. Every time that Pokey and I visited patients, we saw little miracles, but one day something special happened that changed my perspective on how deeply Pokey could give.

On this day the volunteer office asked us to see a patient on the fourth floor — the oncology ward. So, along the way on our rounds, we made a special point to stop in at Darlene's room.

Darlene was 16 years old, with shoulder-length blonde hair and a ready smile. I asked, "Would you like to visit with Pokey?" and she accepted. I immediately knew that something unusual was going on. You see, my ball-of-fire terrier-mix climbed onto the bed and quickly went to the girl's side to tuck in under her arm. Pokey laid her head on the girl's shoulder, with her little dog face pointed up toward Darlene's.

As Darlene looked down into those liquid brown eyes, she whispered to Pokey. This was definitely a change from the usual patient contact, where doggie tricks were the order of the day. Still, these two were obviously doing some serious work here, so I sat back and watched the television. After about 30 minutes, Darlene spoke up. "Thanks so much for visiting. I know you have other patients to see, so I'd better let you go. You'll never know how much this meant to me." And she flashed us a brilliant smile.

Three weeks later, I got a phone call from Ann, our supervisor in the volunteer office, with whom I had shared this story. She said "I just wanted to let you know that Pokey's friend, Darlene, is in heaven."

Darlene, that brave and beautiful 16-year-old child, had received terrible news that day that we visited her. Her cancer had relapsed for a third time. In her treatment protocol, there were no more options. She was destined to die — very soon.

Darlene had to have been afraid. Still, she couldn't trust her family, friends, doctors or caregivers with her fears. There wasn't a human alive who she could talk to — but she could share herself with this little dog! She knew that Pokey wouldn't tell anyone her secrets — wouldn't ridicule her dreams that would never come true.

We'll never truly know what Darlene said that day or just how much good Pokey accomplished with her 30 minutes of loving silence. But Darlene instinctively knew what all dog lovers have known through the ages: No friend can be as trusting, loyal and loving as a dog. 