

Dean and Melinda's Story

Joy, our beautiful 14 year-old daughter, was diagnosed with high functioning autism at age seven. Joy first began exhibiting signs of communication problems at age two. Although she was a happy child, she talked in her own “gibberish language” that only Mom and Dad could decipher. As Joy grew and received more supports, she began talking in English. She participated in special education classes through 4th grade. Today, she is fully mainstreamed 8th grader and is an A/B student in middle school. And although she still has a teacher's aide, she participates in pre-AP English, journalism classes, yearbook committee, art in our community fine art institute, and, of course, dog training classes.

Goldie has been an integral part of Joy's life. As Joy says, Goldie healed her. This is hard to fathom! Joy has certainly received support from many individuals in her life, but much of her “healing” began with Goldie. Goldie's unconditional relationship with Joy helped to open up feelings of empathy and love. Carmen Jones, SLP-CCC, of Speechworks, involved Goldie in Joy's speech therapy program for several years. With all the therapy Goldie has been involved in, she should start talking any day now!

Joy is currently working with her dog trainer and friend, Penny Nichols, to become a therapy team with Creatures and Kids, Inc. (www.creaturesandkids.org). Penny is working with Joy so that she can fulfill her hope of helping other kids.

Goldie is also in service dog training, and wears an identification card that says, “Service Dog in Training”. This allows Joy to take Goldie with her wherever and whenever she needs her. The service dog training ensures that Goldie is available to help relieve Joy's anxiety when she is put into new situations that make her uncomfortable, or even on the verge of panic. Joy will not require Goldie at school because Joy is very familiar with the routine. However, Joy has been able to take Goldie on vacation. Goldie is well behaved, focuses on Joy, and has made vacations more feasible for our family.

Joy's autism diagnosis has positively impacted our family and taught us to give in many new ways. In 2002, we joined with another family to start a parent group for families affected by autism. Today our group has over 350 family members and provides education, awareness and support for families living in central Oklahoma.

We are truly thankful to BRAT and Jacque Holdaway for making it possible to have Goldie in our family.

Here is Joy's story, in her own words.

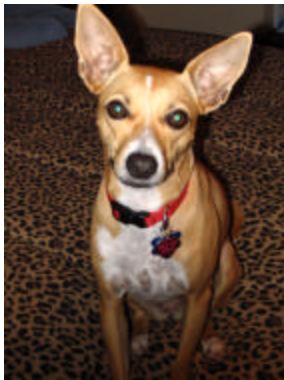
Basenji Miracle

Life before Goldie

Before Goldie came, I was sad most of the time. I had four good friends, but most people ignored me in school. I wanted a dog so badly. Many of my classmates had dogs, but the only pets I ever had owned were fishes, butterflies, or frogs. I often pretended that my stuffed tiger was real and alive. I always loved wolves a lot. I don't even remember when I first started to like wolves or asked for a dog. Wolves are really misunderstood which made me sad. Many ranchers killed and poisoned wolves for no good reason.

When I daydreamed of my perfect dog, the only images that came to mind were a collie, husky, or any other dog with a straight tail. I disliked curly tailed dogs at first. Mom always told me of her basenji when she was my age, but I didn't know about the breed. One day, I was given a dog sticker book. The book was designed to match the sticker to the outline of a dog. The last sticker that I matched was a brown, curly-tailed, dog with a white chest, muzzle, and paws. I liked it a little.

The Day Goldie Arrived



It was a Saturday morning and Sarah, our Uncle Matt and I were at the zoo to see the new brown bears. Matt loved bears. When I came home with Sarah, mom told us we were going to have a guest that day. That afternoon, the doorbell rang and a woman entered. She was not alone for she was accompanied by a golden dog. When I saw her dog, it was love at first sight. The woman introduced herself as Jacque, the leader of the Oklahoma BRAT company. The dog's name was Goldie, a basenji mix rescue dog. Mom and Dad talked for a while, and then decided to let Goldie stay at our house temporarily. Jacque told my parents that she would return the next week if it didn't work out. Jacque departed, leaving all of Goldie's belonging with us.

Goldie's Week Long Stay

After Jacque left, we welcomed Goldie with open arms. She slept on the red arm chair in the family room until dinner. Goldie stayed far away from dad because she was probably abused by a man. She would never go up stairs and if we took her up stairs she would just run down stairs immediately. Goldie hated it when we had any thing long and cylinder shaped in our hands. When ever we left Goldie at home all by herself, we would leave her in the laundry room where we kept her water and food. Goldie hated bathes and when ever we take off her collar, she gets all sad and hides. She was often in submission especially when we crossed our arms. Then the week ended and Jacque arrived. Sarah and I were melancholy as Jacque talked to our parents.

After, an hour of conversation Jacque went to Goldie saying a bittersweet goodbye and departed, leaving Goldie once more. Then our parents told us Goldie is staying for good.

Permanent Family

We got Goldie a tag and toys. She was allowed to run around when we left. Sometimes we would find our shoes in unusual places when we returned. She never chewed our shoes. Goldie started to like dad. She hated baths and loved the sunny and soft places. She was spoiled with love. I love her company when I am home alone. She is my baby that I love to death. Many people wish they had a dog like Goldie, even my best friend Vanessa. Goldie is the sun of every day. Goldie loved it when friends came over, but hated when we left her. She protects us from intruders that enter the house by barking. I started to enjoy telling people about our basenji.

What I Have Taught Goldie

I have trained Goldie to sit, stay, sit pretty, play dead, speak, wait, and jump through a hoop. Goldie can ride on my back around the house. Goldie doesn't chase rabbits or cross the street when we tell her no. She doesn't need a leash when she is outside in our front yard, but we always use a leash when Goldie trains or goes to new places. I am working with Goldie on a certification test so that she can become a therapy dog. Goldie also is training to be my service dog.



How has Goldie Helped Me?

Goldie helps me talk to strangers that ask about her. She helps when I am in a bad place—like when I am sad or down. She helps me when I am scared and nervous.

Goldie brightens my days when I feel miserable. Goldie lets me read to her when I am tired. She helps me get to sleep. I always make sure I have some short fiction books that are about animals to read to Goldie. They are her favorites. Sometimes I read the Bible to Goldie.

Goldie is always the topic of my conversations. Whenever I am away from her, I like to talk about her.

Goldie helped me start drawing. She inspired me and is one of my favorite subjects to draw. Goldie inspires me to write and author books about her.



Goldie helped me to help others when they are sad. Since Goldie helps me when I am sad, she gave me the courage to ask others about how they feel. I talk to Goldie all the time about my problems. I am sure others need someone to ask them about their problems. Goldie helps me by training her to help others. I help her by making her a therapy dog so she could heal wounds of others in pain and suffering just like she healed me.

Goldie helps me get over my fears. She helps me talk to others even though I am shy. Goldie helps me be a little outgoing.

She lets me love someone. She made me feel loved. She makes me feel stronger and happy.

Goldie helps make me take responsibility. I take her for walks. I train her to be a therapy dog. I give her food and water.

She helps others that are depressed. She helps me say my opinion. She protects me when she thinks I am in danger. She lets me be more social to others and helps me be more caring to others. Goldie helps me get up every day. She gives me exercise and company when I am alone. She helps me have courage to tell others how she healed me. Goldie lets me sing to her and doesn't care that I get stage fright. She inspires me to write, draw, and read. Goldie helps me tell others I have autism.

How Do Dogs Help People Who Have Autism?

Many kids that have autism are unable to make friends or socialize with classmates. Dogs can help kids with autism because dogs care about kids and can show love. Dogs help kids make friends, speak to people, to socialize with others, and help them when they are scared. Dogs help kids to realize that they are never alone in the world and that many people care for them. Dogs heal kids with autism in places no therapist, family, or doctors could ever reach.

It is not just dogs that can heal others but most animals can help make miracles and heal scars that no one ever knew were there. Animals help make miracles for not only kids with autism, but for criminals or anyone in pain and sadness.

People can help kids to do basic things in life like be with others and socialize with them, but animals help people in so many different places. Animals can make miracles in kids and adults. Animals transform others in ways no one thought was possible. Animals don't care if kids have autism, a disability, a bad relationship, troubled life, or even if they are a criminal. Animals will befriend any one in need.

My future with Goldie

I can't predict the future but I hope that she will be in my life for a long time. If Goldie passes the certification test, I will take her to the library for the reading program. Goldie will be with kids who are having trouble with reading. Goldie and I will help the kids in ways teachers can't. Sometimes teachers complain and kids have to say they don't know. Goldie and I will encourage kids to make friends and to "go for it" no matter how challenging it is. We will help the kids have more self-esteem because Goldie and I will always appreciate whatever they do.

Update

Since Joy wrote "Basenji Miracle," Joy and Goldie passed their "Therapy Animal" certification, and Goldie has even earned the title of "Service Dog" for Joy.

Jacque's Viewpoint

When I first received the adoption application from this family, I knew that I had a special dog for them. I had been fostering Goldie for several months, so I knew her personality well. She is an active dog, but seemed to “read” people exceptionally well, and could be very calm and laid-back, which was her normal state. She got along well with my other dogs, but was not alpha, and would avoid conflict with them at all cost, and I thought she might do best in a home as an only dog.

I thought it might be worth an introduction with this family. It was obvious immediately that she would fit in perfectly with them. She explored the house and yard with the two girls.

I think that Goldie sensed that Joy needed her most.

I gave them the option of “trying out” Goldie for a week, before the adoption was finalized. It didn't take that long for them to fall in love with her, and make her an integral part of their family.

In 2005, Joy, Goldie, Melinda, and her private speech therapist, Carmen Jones, attended the BRAT convention in Oklahoma City. The difference that 2 years had made was nothing short of miraculous. Joy was very articulate, although still a bit slow, as she thought out carefully what words that she wanted to use. She spoke openly and with enthusiasm about Goldie, and even demonstrated how she often carries Goldie on her back. During the fun contests during the picnic, Joy and Goldie cleaned up! And they honestly were not “pity” awards. She really earned them!

Joy is hoping to attend the 2008 BRAT convention, and give a scheduled demonstration of the things that Goldie has learned. This will be presented in front of a group of 50-75 adult strangers, and that is quite an ambition for a young lady affected by autism. Goldie was my first adoption placement, and with the results I have seen, it is surely to be my most memorable and important one I could have ever made.

BRAT has many dogs that could fill a similar need, or at the very least, fill a hole in a heart and heal a soul. Visit the BRAT website at: www.basenjirescue.org.