

MADDY'S GOLDEN ANGELS

He stood in front of her wheelchair, a big grin on his face, a patriotic bandana around his neck, an enthusiastic wag in his tail.

Tito realized she was quite ill, and he was delighted to meet her, because he knew he could lift her spirits if she would just reach out and touch him.

A small, weak hand moved tentatively in his direction. He edged forward slightly so she could feel his soft golden fur, and her pale face brightened with a smile.

Tito wiggled with pleasure as he took her sadness from her. He was not a trained therapy dog, but nothing made him happier than this mystical connection with a human in need.

His owner, Barb Gibson, moved Tito gently away from the 8-year-old girl who was dying of brain cancer. Four other Golden Retrievers were lined up to take their turn with her, because this was a very special day.

Cathy Casper, a friend of Maddy Szilagyi's family, had taken to heart the child's wish to pet a Golden. The girl would be at a store in Chicago at 1 p.m. the next day. Cathy was in Tennessee, so she put out the word and the message was passed to an Internet chat list for Golden Retriever owners.

Nancy and Joel Barnett, who have two trained therapy dogs named Duke and Romeo, saw the post at 7 a.m. and decided they should go and help.

"How could we not?" she said later. "Giving back is what life is all about."

Meanwhile, Barb and Tito, who were 1-1/2 hours away, saw the message at 8 a.m. She found someone to take her place at work, gave Tito a quick brush, added the bandana, and off they went.

"My heart broke for the little girl and her family," Barb recalled later. "It just seemed like the right thing to do, no matter what it took to get there."

Five owners and their Golden Retrievers met at the designated spot, and for the next half hour they were the center of attention at a busy mall. It was a Golden love fest.

Many people stopped to ask questions about the dogs and to talk about their own at home. Some even pulled photos from their wallets to share with everyone, including a 13-year-old boy who proudly displayed a picture of his Golden. Others told stories about companions they had lost recently and said how much they loved seeing the five beautiful dogs together. Parents with small children stopped to let them pet these Golden ambassadors, who loved all the attention and contact with people.

When Maddy and her family arrived, her parents, Darin and Faith, were visibly touched by the number of Goldens who had come to see their daughter on such short notice. She had her hand on at least one dog at all times during the visit, stroking their heads and soaking up all the Golden love. Darin spent a great deal of time petting them too, as they did their best to take away his sadness for awhile.

"The experience was heart wrenching," Nancy said, "but also very rewarding to see people love their daughter so deeply. They celebrated her life."

"When we left, there wasn't a dry eye," said Barb.

Meanwhile, Cathy in Tennessee and her daughter, Kelly, in Michigan had been talking on the phone. Maddy lived in Michigan, too, and the previous year Cathy had brought her Golden boy, Stormy, to visit her at Children's Hospital. The little girl fell in love with him and had been talking about him constantly ever since. So Cathy and her daughter decided that Stormy had to be with Maddy.

Kelly made the 18-hour round trip drive from Michigan to Tennessee and back, and Stormy arrived at Maddy's house not long after she had gotten home from Chicago. He immediately climbed into bed with her, comforting her and lifting her spirits.

Miraculously, she got out of bed, took a shower, and had a little to eat. It was the power of the human-canine connection at work. Her Stormy was there.

The cancer won; there was no stopping it. But this beautiful dog made Maddy's final week of life more bearable.

And many saw a bright shooting star the night she was escorted to heaven by a host of Golden angels... both canine and human.

-- Merry Shelburne



Tito meets Maddy at the mall



Stormy kisses Maddy's hand, as Faith looks on

THE HUMAN-CANINE CONNECTION: WE NEED DOGS