



Baldwin takes a break from his therapy visits.



Bringing smiles to the faces of hospital patients is all in a day's work for Baldwin.

# THERAPY DOG EXTRAORDINAIRE

BY SUSAN HARTZLER

I'm so proud. Last year, my dog Baldwin was nominated for the prestigious AKC Ace Award as Therapy Dog of the Year, in recognition of his work in the service of humankind. Now over ten years old, Baldwin has been helping others since I first brought him home from the Lange Foundation in 1999, after he'd been rescued from a pound.

The first person Baldwin helped was me. I had just lost my dog Blondie, another pound mutt who died at 19½ years of age. My heart was broken. I couldn't imagine life without my golden girl by my side, but this little black ball of fur gave me the strength and courage to love again.

Baldwin is a Puli, and the polar opposite of Blondie in every conceivable way. Where Blondie had long, straight golden hair that was constantly clinging to my clothes and resembled my own in color and texture, Baldwin's jet

black mop top looks like no one else's, is hypoallergenic and doesn't shed. To me, he looks like a cross between one of Jim Henson's Muppet characters and Charlie Chaplin. He resembles a black faced Fozzie Bear with bow legs that cause him to sway when he walks, just like the silent movie star.

## DESTINED FOR GREATNESS

From the beginning, I knew Baldwin was destined for greatness. There was something about him that made him stick out in the pack. He was so smart; I had to constantly train him. I decided to get him certified as a therapy dog through Therapy Dogs International.

I'll never forget the first time I took Baldwin to County General in Downtown Los Angeles. I dressed him in scrubs, complete with a purple stethoscope. He didn't mind dressing up. I think he sensed he was about to

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embark on an important mission and that the outfit was just part of the deal.

I was a bit nervous because I had to monitor Baldwin and make sure he remained calm in this new hospital environment with all its strange smells and sounds. I wasn't at all sure what he would do. But I had my treat bag filled and had taught Baldwin lots of tricks to share with the kids.

## A MIRACLE WITH MARIA

I don't know how, but Baldwin knew exactly what to do from the moment we walked into the oncology ward. We were to visit a little seven-year-old girl named Maria who had just finished a round of chemotherapy treatments. She was alone, waiting for us in the playroom in a hospital gown, looking gaunt and tired, her pale complexion making her seem almost transparent. Her cheek bones stood out and her eyes looked sunken, surrounded by black circles. Even her pink fluffy slippers looked too big for her. I took note of the IV in her arm because I wanted to make sure Baldwin didn't bump or dislodge it.

I asked her if she wanted Baldwin to come sit next to her. She nodded. He hopped right up on the couch and immediately laid his entire body across her. At first, I was mortified. What if he hurt her? I didn't expect him to do that, but it was too late. He just did it.

I understand he is tuned into something far greater than I would ever understand.

Before I could do anything about it, Maria rubbed under his chin. Then he put his head down and sighed before closing his eyes. Curious, I sat across from them and watched. Maria began breathing deeply with Baldwin, getting more color back with every inhalation. It was a miracle. For the next hour, Maria gently stroked Baldwin's fur. Her tiny hand moved over his back again and again.

Baldwin is a high energy dog that runs agility courses, herds sheep and can perform all sorts of tricks. He makes me throw balls and Frisbees for hours on end. Rarely does he snuggle with me. Yet here he was in the oncology ward doing exactly what had to be done, exactly what this little girl needed at that moment.

Ever since then, whenever we go to the hospital, I take my cues from Baldwin, not the other way around. I understand he is tuned into something far greater than I would ever understand. I'm just his facilitator at the end of the leash. 🐾

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