



Therapy Animals of Utah Our Beginnings

Therapy Animals of Utah came from just exactly where it should have -- the bond between a very special dog and his boy. Jeremy, son of Lana Davis, was a handsome, kind and sensitive young man who enjoyed school, playing football and most of the other things 16-year-old boys loved. At a time when most boys were concerned about passing their driver's test, however, Jeremy was fighting Ewing's sarcoma for his life. In the middle of his struggle, Lana's friend, Ella Brown, a conscientious and respected breeder of German shepherds, offered him a special puppy, and together they named the pup Grizzly Ridge Von Braun Schmaling. Jeremy called him, "My dog Griz."

Griz was at Jeremy's side as he fought his cancer, and when the boy lost his battle six weeks after his 17th birthday, Grizzly grieved as deeply as a human. Lana descended beyond grief however. She had lost not only her son, but also her husband, her home, her health and, in her view, everything that made her life worth living. As the weeks and months dragged on, Grizzly began to transfer his loving care to Lana. Just before his death, Jeremy had told her, "Mom, I want you to have Grizzly. Maybe there's a way for you and Griz to help other sick kids." When Lana was too depressed to get out of bed, Grizzly brought her shoes and dropped them on her chest, woofing gently but insistently, for her to get up and go for a walk. He, quite literally, saved her life.

Step by step and bit by bit, Grizzly helped Lana heal. She went back to school at the University of Utah with the goal of becoming a clinical social worker. After a series of clinical experiences with children that began to show Lana more about the healing power of her special dog, she began to form an idea of founding a nonprofit organization involving people and their animal companions serving others in need of help. Though her research had informed her that people were already beginning to take animals into nursing homes to cheer up residents, Lana was envisioning animal-assisted therapy as an auxiliary treatment, much like physical, occupational, art, or music therapy, and carried out by trained, licensed paraprofessionals. With more research, Lana discovered the Delta Society, a national organization that was on the same path.

Together with a small group of friends and acquaintances, Lana began the first Delta Society affiliated animal-assisted therapy organization in Utah. With Dave Davis, Lana's husband, as board chair, the organization gained its 501(c) 3 status as a nonprofit and chose the name The Good Shepherd Association. The slogan "Paws Helping People" reflected Lana's emphasis on handlers observing and honoring the healing skills of their animal partners rather than directing their every move.



In four years, the organization grew from a few people and their animals to dozens of teams serving in facilities all over Salt Lake City. Lana, Grizzly and a few others were featured on national television and *Reader's Digest*. With Lana's insistence on excellence in handler training and team testing, the organization became increasingly professional with a small paid staff, rigorous standards and public accountability.

Unfortunately, the very success of the organization began to cause problems. Some members resented Lana's media attention. Some regretted the professionalism of the organization and yearned for a return to a more club-like group held together by a dedicated circle of volunteers. Several people resigned over the philosophical split, the board of directors began to take sides, and jealousy and mistrust became rife. In what might have been termed a hostile takeover, the board of directors dismissed both Dave and Lana Davis from the organization that they had given five years of their lives to form, and Jeremy's legacy. The remaining organization reorganized, changed its name and charted a new path in its own direction.

But Lana's friends remained loyal to her vision and would not let her give up on her work. Together they formed a new nonprofit organization, the Utah Animal-Assisted Therapy Association. They started over and focused on becoming an organization with the same rigorous standards as the original, team mentoring and supervision and impeccable ethics. In 2010, they changed the name of the organization to the more pronounceable Therapy Animals of Utah.

Delta Society changed its name in 2012 to Pet Partners, and in 2013 changed its affiliate program to a more demanding Community Partner program. Therapy Animals of Utah became one of the first Pet Partner Community Partners in the United States and remains the only one in Utah. The organization continues to follow a strategy of careful growth. It has three Pet Partner licensed volunteer instructors and four licensed team evaluators. As Lana had done in the 1990s, Therapy Animals of Utah's instructors were instrumental in the 2012 revision, rewrite and implementation of the newest Pet Partners Volunteer Handler Training Class. Its evaluators were active in the 2014 symposium for planning the revision and improvement of the Pet Partners Team Evaluation process. Experienced volunteer mentors continue to supervise and assist novice handlers. Though Lana completed her master's degree in social work and is now in private practice in Oregon, she and Dave continue to watch the progress of Therapy Animals of Utah with pride.

For the complete story of our beginnings, see [The Good Shepherd, A Special Dog's Gift of Healing](#), by Jo Coudert, Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1998.