



Comfort Comes on Quiet Paws

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Philosopher Martin Buber once said, “An animal’s eyes have the power to speak a great language.” This has never been more true than when one looks into the eyes of a therapy dog.

Registered through the National Greyhound Association under the name “Belly Girl”, 5-year old Billie Girl is a retired racing greyhound who never won a race. She was born in a kennel and lived in a 4 by 6 crate, let out only to relieve herself and train. She was handled by a variety of strangers but never given a chance to bond with handlers or other dogs, completely denying her “pack” instinct.

After losing just four races, she was retired and sent to the prison in Coldwater, Michigan. There she spent 4 months being trained in basic obedience by a prisoner as part of the Second Chance at Life program. From the prison, Billie Girl was put into foster care through Greyhound Expressions, a greyhound rescue in Monroe, Michigan. All the moving was hard on her. She was very timid and fearful of strangers.

In September of 2007, Billie Girl was adopted and started intensive socialization training in preparation for an Animal Assisted Therapy Program. After a year and a half of hard work Billie Girl graduated from the Mid-Michigan Therapy Dog Program in Goodrich. A proud, calm, and confident greyhound, Billie Girl now regularly visits with residents in Assisted Living Facilities, a Hospice Care Center, and the Day Care at a Women’s Shelter.

Billie Girl looks forward to these visits as much as the residents do and becomes very excited when asked if she wants to “go to work”. With her watchful, sighthound eyes she never misses an opportunity to greet a resident. People who may normally sit quietly by themselves will reach out to engage with her. She works her way around a circle of people standing patiently as unsteady hands stroke her silky black fur. Residents who cannot reach out to her are often treated to a gentle nose under their hand as she encourages them to pet her.

Although Billie Girl does not bring medicine, she helps relieve pain. She may not be able to ask the residents how they are today, but she doesn’t have to, she knows. Billie Girl can’t carry on a conversation, but she is the best listener, as residents relate to her stories about their own pets or anything else they want to talk about. She doesn’t care if they ramble or stray off topic, Billie Girl just likes to hear their voices and feel their tender touches.

Like all dogs, Billie Girl’s heart is endless. She doesn’t forget those who love her, her heart just grows to include new loves as they enter her life. The connections she makes are just as important to her as to the people she connects with. Everyone she visits is her favorite person and she has her own way of letting each resident know that they are special to her and that she loves them.

Billie Girl may be my dog, but to the dozens of people she visits, she is a friend.

Billie Girl lives in Saginaw with Don and Kelly Belcher. Billie Girl and Kelly are a Certified Therapy Dog Team through Mid-Michigan Therapy Dogs. Don and Kelly also foster rescued greyhounds and whippets. You can contact them at don.kellyb@yahoo.com.