

Cindi's Story: "Star" my Therapy Dog

By Cindi Scholefield

My parents lived in a tiny cottage on Kingsway, part of the property of the landlord, an eccentric old gentleman Mr. Cowper (we called him Cowps) who among other things collected hundreds of Cremo milk cartons because he knew he would need them someday. He had a man-a-yard / household help / gardener called Victor who did everything. Victor was a great animal lover and with nothing at all



managed to rescue numerous puppies and care for them, most of whom sadly didn't survive the busy road. When my father died Cowps cut the rent in half as he knew my mother would have a hard time, and Victor 'adopted' her. He would station himself outside her front door at night and sit with his cutlass and assure her no one would pass him. And no one ever did.

When she decided to go back to England while she had a few years' work left in her (knowing Jamaica wouldn't give her a pension she could live on) I 'inherited' Victor (I was living not too far away luckily), and when Cowps died not long after Victor fell into the callous hands of the old man's daughter and things deteriorated rapidly. Diabetes took one leg and she

dumped him in the hellhole known as the Golden Age Home in Vineyard Town. I visited regularly and took care packages, but was invariably in tears at the condition of the place and also the residents. One day I decided to take Luna, one of my shihpoos, to visit and it was incredible. As I crossed the hot and dusty courtyard to reach Victor's section the residents who were propped up on benches leaning against the walls began to stir; then to smile, these ravaged faces that probably hadn't cracked a smile in years. And then to talk. Not to me, to Luna! I walked her around to them and they leaned down to touch her and broke into toothless grins. Then as I walked away they began talking animatedly to each other. If it hadn't been for Luna, they would have remained locked in their stony silences all day with their memories. That's when the seed was planted.

Victor was thrilled with our visits, and I only stopped when, after losing the other leg, he finally gave up trying. It was a mercy.

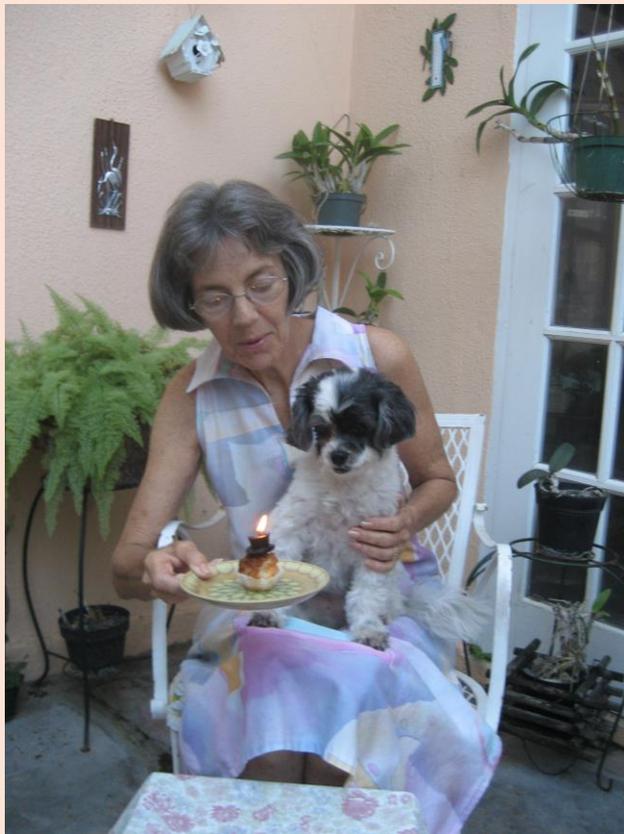
But the seed was growing and I decided to ask Theresa Bryan to evaluate my two little ones, thinking she would choose Luna. To my surprise she said Star was the perfect candidate, because she was more obedient and she loved everybody, whereas Luna had her likes and dislikes.

Full of enthusiasm, I started calling the nursing homes in Kingston. They all said no animals allowed. I was horrified and tried to explain the benefits, but they were adamant and

brushed me off -NOO animals on the premises. Finally one home said yes they would like a visit, so off I went that weekend to AWBI on Sandhurst Crescent.

I will never forget the first day I arrived with Star, to find all the residents who weren't bedridden outside under the mango tree in their wheelchairs. I stood at a respectful distance in the middle of the semi-circle, and introduced myself and my baby and asked if anyone would like to have her on their lap. One lady already had her arms stretched out so far she nearly fell out of her chair, and I hurried to her. From that day Mrs. Murphy became our good friend.

Star was the perfect little girl. She would sit sedately on a lady's lap, look up adoringly, and revel in all the stroking and



caresses. Then if the lady bent forward she would very gently lick her nose. She never made the first move. She seemed to know exactly what to do in each lap. There were residents there who had not spoken since they arrived, and they started telling Star stories of the shop they used to run, the husband who used to run around, the children who went to

foreign and didn't remember them. They all seemed to get a lot off their chests, and, as I had found in the Golden Age Home, they all began to chat to each other after our visits.

I was almost redundant. I didn't even have a name except "Star's Mother". We would arrive at the grilled verandah on a Sunday, I would ring the bell and I'd hear the ladies inside saying "Star is here, Star is here". They were so excited. And so were the nurses. That was an extra bonus. The nurses all loved her and it was as if she smoothed out the rough edges of their personalities, and made them somehow mellower, and gentler with the residents.

Sister Stewart who ran the home was amazed. She told me that the difference in the ladies' health and outlook on life was vast. She had never thought one little dog could do all that.

We continued to visit happily for nearly 3 years. During that time some of the ladies passed on, and new ones arrived. They were all mesmerized by Star, and I was so proud of her.

Sadly though in 2010 she had a stroke, and although I pulled her through it and the subsequent convulsions, sleeping on the floor with her for 3 months, after that she refused to go to anyone else, and I regretfully had to tell them we could no longer come on a Sunday. Mrs. Murphy lived a lot longer than anyone expected, given her many physical problems, and I continued to drop in to see her, although it wasn't the same without Star. Eventually her mind wandered off and she slipped away.

Presently I have three rescued shi-poops but I realize that none of them have quite the right 'therapy' personality. If one day I am lucky enough to find another one like Star I would begin again without a moment's hesitation.

Can you imagine if this story could be replicated in every nursing home.

Then schools.

Then hospitals.

Then prisons.

The possibilities for enrichment and healing are endless.

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