

Barker Ordinary? Pass the Crow, Please... **A Memorial Tribute to my Doggie Nephew**

By Starlett Johnson

Barker was an amazing dog with astounding achievements. He was Sherry Buchbinder's indispensable Service Dog and helped her, literally, every step of the way. He was also a Registered Therapy Dog of such extraordinary compassion and disposition that he was welcomed everywhere, including hospital Intensive Care Units. And the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America, which grants wishes to children with life-threatening medical conditions, named him their first "Canine Ambassador".

*I had the great privilege of meeting Sherry and Barker at the 2007 Wags-For-Wishes event in Del Mar, California. Our RVs were parked back-to-back. I offered to help Sherry set up camp. She offered ice cream. We chatted, as camping neighbors do. I introduced her to my dogs and she introduced me to her Service Dog, Barker. Now don't get me wrong, I thought he was a nice enough dog. Quiet, well behaved, friendly. But he seemed, well, ordinary. It pains me to admit it, but when I learned he was there participating as a Therapy Dog in his first-ever Make-A-Wish event, I wasn't particularly impressed. I mean, how great could this completely **ordinary** dog possibly be? But ordinary or not, when I learned that Sherry and Barker regularly visited a convalescent facility near my home, I jumped at Sherry's offer to come see her "little brown dog" at work.*

*Two weeks later, we met at the facility, and I assumed we'd go in, people would pat the dog on the head, maybe scratch him a little, and they'd feel better because visiting with a dog is a healthy thing to do. And that's exactly what we did...sort of. Even for a wordy person like me, it's difficult to explain what I witnessed that day. Some people seemed to feel obligated to pat him once and be done with it. Some people didn't want to visit with him at all. But a surprising number would pet him gently and softly, reminiscing about long-ago pets, people or places they had loved. Through these encounters, Barker would sit very, very still. At first I assumed he was politely disinterested. But then I began to see something I still, to this day, can't explain. It was as if all the energy of the universe funneled right through him, around him, and from him into the person he was visiting. In a world of separation, Barker **connected**. And somehow, a change – an almost cellular alteration – occurred. To see Barker work was to see magic.*

Sherry and I still laugh about that day, the day Barker became my 'doggie nephew'. She especially enjoys recounting how, at the end of the visit, I stood rooted in the parking lot dazedly repeating "Wow. I had no idea. Wow." It was, she wryly comments, the only time she's ever seen me speechless. There's an episode of the Andy Griffith Show where Andy's pride is stung because Opie had given only "a measly 3 cents" to a worthy cause. Opie tries to explain he's saving to buy something for his girlfriend Charlotte, but Andy is too busy lecturing about civic obligation to ascertain what that 'something' might be. As the family is sitting down to supper, we finally learn that Opie is saving to buy Charlotte a winter coat because "hers is kinda wore out" and her mother can't afford to buy her a new one. Opie asks his Pa what's for dinner, and Andy replies "You and Aunt Bee are a-havin' fried chicken. And I'm a-havin' crow." Barker ordinary? Pass the crow, please...

In the coming months, I was able to tag along on several visits and witnessed this inexplicable phenomenon time and time again. It was life altering. Understand, I have an amazingly good life. My husband, two dogs, three cats, family and friends surround me with love, support, and

laughter through all of life's adventures. Most of my days are spent puttering around the house with my fur-kids but, when I go "out and about", my favorite pastime is chatting with complete strangers. I love the interaction and actively listening to who they are, what they feel, what burdens them. I love hearing "I'm so glad I met you. I really feel better now." But the tragic reality is that I'm always just a tiny step away from panic. Panic that the part of the world I cannot control, cannot influence, will infringe and I will be too small, too powerless, to protect that which I love and value. My faith is tested by the inhumanity and blatantly manipulative greed that is such an insidious part of our world. Inside I scream "Is anyone out there? Please! Please come and help us!" In those moments of darkest abandonment, I think of Barker's tangible magic and I know for a certainty that we are NOT alone. We couldn't be. Magic like that couldn't possibly exist without something, someone out there. So my faith returns, and my panic fades.

I had known Barker only a few months when Sherry approached me about writing a short story about him for the Hidden Valley Obedience Club's newsletter. Hence "Barker: The Dog With Two Last Names" was penned. Meanwhile, Sherry and Barker began their meteoric ascent into celebrity. Was I surprised? Not a bit.

If you were to assume that Barker's success is due in large part to Sherry's ambition you'd be wrong. She is the complete antithesis of the stereotypical stage mother. Sherry and Rhein's entire lifestyle revolves around two things: the happiness of their fur-kids and helping others. Happy fur/helping others. Period. We teasingly muse that her contribution to the Therapy Dog effort was chauffeuring Barker to where he wanted to go and holding the end of his leash once they got there. Humbling, but essentially true. Make no mistake...when it came to Therapy Dog work, Barker called the shots.

Nine months ago, Doc Barker, a five-month-old Chocolate Lab puppy, was donated to the family by Charlene Cordiero of Bayside Retrievers in Lake Matthews, California. Charlene had heard that Sherry was looking for a puppy to train and hopefully take over as her Service Dog when Barker retired. A few months after Doc arrived, Barker started to limp and could no longer provide weight-bearing balance assistance for Sherry. Assuming this was due to age (he was eight), Barker was due to retire as Sherry's Service Dog this summer. The plan was that he would continue his Therapy Dog work. The problem, tragically, wasn't age. It was cancer. Undoubtedly Barker knew he was ill and, pressed for time, he used every possible minute to actively mentor his baby brother to take over his duties. Barker proved a strict but fair disciplinarian. If Doc wriggled too much during a Sit/Stay, Barker stepped in. If Doc goofed off a little too much, Barker stepped in. The accelerated training worked and, at 12 months of age, Doc earned his CGC certificate. He also became a registered "Pet-Partner" (Complex-rated) through the Delta Society. Quite an honor, Sherry was told by the astonished evaluator, in that she had never passed a 12-month-old puppy with a Complex-rating before. Doc's skills as a Service Dog are, Sherry tells me, phenomenal. Meanwhile, Barker's efforts are paying off big-time in Doc's Therapy Dog work. Literally.

Throughout these past nine months, Doc accompanied Sherry and Barker to various facilities and functions. No longer content to idly sit by being just another pretty snout, Doc took Make-A-Wish fundraising efforts into his own paws. Noticing that Doc loved to carry things in his mouth (he is a retriever, after all), a friend suggested that he carry the donation basket. Needless to say, donations soared. Assuming the increase in contributions was due to the cute factor, it took awhile for dad Rhein to discover that there was something more at work here. Doc, it seems, was deliberately catching and holding the eyes of passersby. And, when he would do this, the passerby would inevitably give a donation. Hmmm. Apparently Doc is funneling his

own brand of energy through a pair of mesmerizingly hypnotic yellow eyes right into our hearts (and wallets). But Doc is no mere cash cow. Where Barker's Therapy Dog energy was swirling light particles, Doc's are all soothing flowing ribbons of brown velvet. It's a different magic than Barker's, but just as strong, just as life altering. Oh, and did I mention that Doc can pick up a quarter from off the ground?! Wow!

After Barker passed, Doc was named the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of America's second 'Canine Ambassador'. It's not an honorary title by any means. Doc is fully capable to not only continue his big brother's legacy, but to help it to grow. With Barker's backing, how can he not? And all funds raised by Doc will go, in memory of Barker, to the **Ambassador Barker Wishes in Perpetuity Fund**, which will grant Service Dog and Therapy Dog wishes to children.

Barker's service vest, collar, working leash, and other personal items are being lovingly donated by Sherry to the National Make-A-Wish Foundation of America office located in Phoenix, Arizona. They will be displayed in a memorial wall exhibit honoring Barker's incredible achievements. It is hoped that visitors will, through these objects, tap into and carry away a little bit of what made Barker so very special. I know I do.

For many of us, a day without fur is a day without sunshine, and Sherry and Barker promised they'd be there for me to give me a fur-fix if I were ever hospitalized. Ironically, three weeks after Barker's April 6, 2010 passing, I underwent surgery. Sherry checked in regularly by phone. And, Barker, my sweet doggie nephew, was true to his word. His spirit stayed by my side, sitting very, very still, with all the energy of the universe funneling right through him, around him, and from him into me. Barker connected, and it wasn't just magic. It was extraordinary magic.