

Barker: The Dog with Two Last Names **A Memorial Revision of the Original 2007 Story**

By Starlett Johnson

The hot dog, clutched in the hand of a small boy, hovered mere inches from the nose of an 80-pound Chocolate English Labrador Retriever. In the ordinary world, the hot dog would be history. But when the boy in question was a Make-A-Wish child, and the Lab was Barker Buchbinder, the hot dog was completely safe.

Barker's mom, Sherry Buchbinder, was justifiably proud of her Lab's amazing self-discipline. After all, that self-discipline earned Barker the Therapy Dog equivalent of a Doggie Doctorate in just one year. "Barker was my first Therapy Dog", says Sherry about their success, "I had no idea what to do. It was just him."

*Barker's life didn't start out smoothly. "Products" of an unsavory environment, he and his sister had little defense against their filthy surroundings and complete lack of care. By the time they were rescued, the 10-week-old puppies were deathly ill. Rushed to an Emergency Veterinary Clinic where Sherry's sister-in-law Kim worked, the pups were grimly diagnosed with advanced Parvo. It was hoped the little female would pull through (she did). Barker, however, was not expected to survive. Resisting the recommendation to "put him down", Kim crusaded to keep the little male alive. Her determination paid off. With a healthy four-month-old puppy in her arms, Kim called Sherry and said, "I've got **your** dog!" Sherry wasn't looking for a puppy – she already had two dogs of her own, plus her sister's two dogs who were temporarily boarding with them -- but Kim insisted the puppy was meant to be hers. And, indeed, it was love at first sight.*

*Which brings us to how Barker got his name. Come to find out, Barker isn't named after a behavior, he's named after Sherry's hero, a United States Military Veteran Navy Pilot, dear friend, and adopted Dad: Mr. Lynn C. Barker. "I had fallen in love with the puppy, but was hesitant about bringing him into a home with four other dogs," explains Sherry. Lynn had recently lost his beloved 14-year-old Cockapoo, Sammi, and Sherry suggested he take the puppy. Unexpectedly, Lynn said "No, he's **your** dog!" Named in Lynn Barker's honor, Barker Buchbinder is the dog with two last names.*

"Shortly after Barker arrived, he did something amazing," Sherry describes. "He sat and watched his dad, Rhein, go outside each morning and bring in the newspaper. One morning Rhein opened the door and Barker ran out. Thinking the puppy was running away, they yelled for Barker to stop. But before they knew it, Barker was headed back with the newspaper. From then on, retrieving the paper was Barker's job.

For the first two years of life with Sherry, Rhein, and the other dogs, Barker was a typical Lab puppy bouncing around and into everything. That began to change when Sherry underwent knee surgery. "Coming home from the hospital, I worried that Barker was going to bounce around like his usual self and come down on my knee," recalls Sherry. Instead, Barker sat quietly by Sherry's side. "I couldn't believe it. He just did it on his own."

When Barker turned three, two events occurred that showcased Barker's true potential. First, Sherry underwent two more knee surgeries. Second, Dozer, the family's alpha-dog, died. "Barker just stepped up to the plate." Sherry explains, "I was in a wheelchair at first, and eventually I needed a cane." Barker began helping Sherry, assisting with her balance, providing

stability, pulling her up stairs, etc. With the cooperation of their postal carrier Charles, he brought in the mail. Barker also learned to bring Sherry her various medications. "I painted the bottle caps different colors so Barker could get the one I needed. I used to say he became my ini-dispensible Service Dog!"

Barker was five years old when Sherry signed him up for his AKC Canine Good Citizen (CGC) Certificate test at the 2006 Wags-For-Wishes event in Del Mar, California. Sponsored by the San Diego Chapter of the Make-A-Wish Foundation®, this annual fundraiser offers dog lovers several days of competitions and activities including agility, disc-dog, fly-ball, earth-dog, carting, lure coursing, splash dogs, sheepherding, obedience, etc. The CGC program is designed to reward dogs who have good manners at home and in the community, and Barker passed with flying colors. "When the evaluators, who were from the Hidden Valley Obedience Club, saw how well Barker and I worked together, they kept saying they couldn't believe he wasn't a Therapy Dog", says Sherry. "I didn't know anything about Therapy Dogs, so I asked them a ton of questions. They were so helpful and enthusiastic that I was inspired to do what we do."

Before work, Barker was bathed, his teeth were brushed, his Therapy Dog harness, collar, and leash sanitized ("That's when he knew we were going to work"), and paws disinfected with gel both at home and again just prior to entering a facility. Barker didn't mind the several-weekly baths – he thoroughly despised being dirty. "We called him our white collar dog" says dad, Rhein. Returning home from an outing in the great out-of-doors, Barker ran to the shower and jumped in. "It was like he was saying, "Get it off! Get the dirt off of me!" laughed Sherry.

Returning to the San Diego Wags-For-Wishes event in 2007, Sherry and Barker volunteered as a Pet Therapy team and visited with the Make-A-Wish children, their families, event participants and the general public. "Volunteering at Wags-For-Wishes changed our lives forever!" Sherry said.

Therapy work can be exhausting, for both dog and handler. Sherry and Barker were asked to visit a young ICU patient who had bonded with Barker during earlier visits. "We didn't know it," Sherry says quietly, "but they were going to disconnect life support while Barker and I were there. I was totally unprepared. It was really hard for both of us. But our presence truly helped the family during an extremely difficult time. We made a difference."

Sherry and Barker volunteered across Southern California and Arizona, visiting hospitals, convalescent facilities, senior apartment complexes, a USO facility for transitioning veterans and military personnel, and participated in a myriad of fundraising and educational events. "If Barker worked two days in a row, he just crashed the third day. But if a few days went by and he hadn't gone to work, he'd nudge his blue vest, make little vocalizations, and stare at me with those big yellow eyes."

Training to be a Therapy Dog encompasses lots of touching (paws, ears, tails, etc.), and obedience behaviors (long sit stays, comes, etc.). Dogs are observed in the car, in a variety of public venues (stores, malls, hospitals, etc.), and are subjected to many loud distractions (falling metal chairs, crashing hospital carts, confrontations, etc.). Trainers are looking for anything that might cause a dog to react inappropriately.

Like a waved-in-your-face hot dog, for example. Or the little girl who used Barker's wagging tail as a jump rope. And the time a small child gripped onto Barker's, ahem, nether-regions. Sherry admits, "Training can't possibly prepare you for everything. Barker just took everything in stride and loved it!"