

FREE PREVIEW

LEO

For almost four years, my wife and I would go to visit my mother-in-law “Nana”, (now age 92) several times a week. Nana lived at a skilled nursing facility in the Alzheimer’s wing. As Sophie (our Rough Coated Collie) was a Certified Therapy Dog, we would usually take her with us and walk through the activity room on the Alzheimer’s floor to greet all the patients who were sitting in there. This nursing home made it a policy to get all the patients out of their rooms every day, to help them socialize and communicate even if they did not want to. Many of the patients never had any visitors. Sophie would introduce herself to a patient and stand and wait till she was acknowledged before moving on to the next patient. Sophie was able to provoke a response (pet, smile, and laugh), even from patients who did not normally inter-react with staff or others.

An unusual event happened one day as we were walking Sophie through the activity room while the patients watched television. A man in a wheelchair was sitting in a far corner. He made eye contact with Sophie and began to pat his leg and said “here girl” to call her to him. Sophie noticed him and slowly started to walk towards him. He continued calling “here girl” until Sophie got close enough and sat down next to him so that he could pet her. This man, named Leo, asked, “Dog name?” We told him “Sophie”. He spoke in broken sentences for a brief time and seemed to really enjoy the visit. Sophie intently watched and listened to Leo as he spoke very softly. She continued to nudge him until he responded back.

After we were done visiting all of the patients in the activity room, we left to go down the hall to visit with Nana in her room, which was at the far end of the hallway. Upon exiting the activity room, you were required to pass the nurses’ station for the floor. There was a couple standing and talking to the charge nurse. As Sophie and I walked closer to the couple, we noticed that they were weeping. I asked whether there was anything we could do to help. The woman answered, “no, you’ve already done something.” Asking what she meant, she explained that, Leo, the man in the wheelchair, was her father. He had been at the nursing facility on the Alzheimer’s care floor for almost six months.

Today was the first day he spoke!

What I thought was sorrow were actual tears of joy. Whatever the brief encounter with Sophie did to remind him of something a long time ago, or to get him to speak, was a wonderful

thing. We had thought someone had died when we first saw the couple at the nurse's station and it turned out to be a very happy moment for Leo and his family. Although he never became a great conversationalist during his remaining time at the nursing home, Leo was able to speak and at least respond to nurses if he needed some type of help or if he was in pain. It was amazing how I went from assuming the worst and being sad to experiencing a moment of joy, all delivered by Sophie.

We would see Leo many other times. It was almost as if he knew we were coming because we always seemed to find him waiting by the elevator to welcome Sophie. Another time that we saw him after our first visit, my wife asked him if he would like to give Sophie a "cookie" (our word for dog biscuit). He shook his head enthusiastically and my wife gave Leo a Milk-Bone, but apparently something got lost in the translation. That day Leo had a Milk-Bone for his dessert. Leo thought it was *his* cookie.

Another thing Leo would do when he first saw Sophie get off the elevator, was to follow her down the hall in his wheelchair, peddling with his feet as fast as he could to keep up with or to catch Sophie. This type of exercise was exactly what the nurses tried to get Leo to do many times on his own. He was always willing to do it to see Sophie for a longer period of time and he got his exercise this way twice a week. Leo never learned my name or my wife's name but he certainly remembered Sophie every time we came to visit. Leo lived several more years, and we have Sophie to thank for giving him back the ability to communicate.