

A Journey to a Dog's Life

By Lauren Hood

As a young child, my grandparent's encyclopedia volume "D" was always in my hands. I spent hours looking at the slick color pages filled with dogs, listed in breeds. I would dream about which one I might have someday and what I would name it. My parents finally gave me a dog for my fifth birthday. He was a Toy Fox Terrier that I named Tim. Being so young, I had little understanding of dog behavior and was jealous that he would obey my father but not me. I could only play with him in a large fenced area outside. I always wanted a dog that could be in the house with me.

My parents divorced and my dog was left with my father. My sister and I were given a Cairn Terrier to have at my mom's house, but she would run away so she had to be fenced or leashed, and was rarely allowed indoors.

The Dog That Changed My Life

When I moved to Tuscaloosa to attend the University of Alabama, I got a cat and kept him in my dorm room, and later, apartment. I bought him a harness and leash and tried to teach him to go walking with me, but that attempt was unsuccessful. I needed a dog.

The dog that changed my life was a two year old American Pit Bull Terrier named Dirty. He became my best friend and companion. I felt very safe when he was with me and would go running with him several times a day. He was with me unless I was in class or at work (sometimes he went to work too). He was 80 pounds of Pit Bull love. Although I did not understand canine behavior as I do now, he would obey me *most* of the time. He was a very intelligent, loving animal. He loved being my dog. I trusted him completely to protect me, although I am glad we never got into a real situation, knowing what I do now. When I lost my Dirty dog, I could have died myself. I still miss him terribly. I did not realize how much I depended on him for my emotional and physical security. I stopped running.

The Next Dog That Changed My Life

I did not want another dog. I wanted Dirty. A few times I went to the animal shelter and would end up crying and leaving. No dog could replace him. I did not have another dog for 8 months. I went to see a psychologist because I was so depressed about his loss. After months of therapy, the psychologist told me that I needed to get another dog.

My best friend knew how upset I was and offered to buy an American Pit Bull Terrier puppy for me, and let me pick the one I wanted out of the litter. We went to pick out my

new puppy that day. The puppies were mostly black and white, two were solid white and one was white with a black spot on her eye. I wanted a male, so I picked the solid white male. I had thought about names while looking through the classifieds in the newspaper and saw Antique Trunks. I thought "Trunk". That sounds tough. But then it hit me! Trump! Playing card games, if you TRUMP a card, you win. That sounded like the name for my new pup. This began my life-changing journey with Trump.

I bought a *Bully Breeds* magazine at the pet store when I went to buy supplies for the new pup. I wanted to know everything about my new dog. This dog was going to be everything that Dirty was not. Little did I know how true that would be. I wanted this dog to obey my every command ... the first time! In the magazine I read an article on problems that can affect bully breeds like atopy (allergies), and how the projection of white in the coat and deafness are linked on the piebald gene. This worried me some since I had a white puppy, but even though I had a signed agreement with the breeder about defects, I could not have taken him back. I cared for my new puppy and took him to regular veterinary visits. I read anything I could find about American Pit Bull Terriers and talked to Trump's veterinarian to verify the information I was reading. Trump had lots of problems from skin infections, allergies, vomiting, diarrhea, etc. We spent a lot of time at the veterinarian's office even though I was trying to do everything right.

Something's Wrong!

There were also very strange things that Trump would do or would not do. I trained (tricked) him to sit and shake for a biscuit, but only because my sister's dog Stella would do it, as she seemed to have learned from Dirty. I tried to approach training Trump with voice commands and physical placement. Dirty would obey several commands but not always "come" when we were outside. I thought my attempts were not working because Trump was a strong-willed bully breed and a young puppy. My sister's dog Stella would pay attention. You could even tell her things like "Stella you stink", and she would put herself in the bathtub and wait for you. I got nowhere with Trump's training. He got older and wilder. He would jump on people when they came over. He ate MANY different items in the house including, but not limited to, shoes, the bottom of my Cherry wood dresser and night stand, all interior decorations, baskets, etc. He would not listen to anything at all. I started taking him running. He seemed to have less energy, but would pull on the leash, and, if we saw another dog, he would pull towards it. He did strange things like jumping up barking from a hard sleep when there would be no noise, sleeping through loud noises, and many other odd behaviors. Under circumstances where a normal dog would be attentive or awake, Trump was not. I had his veterinarian test him repeatedly to determine whether or not he was deaf. The veterinarian would tell me that he could hear and was not deaf. He used a vibrating tuning fork next to Trump's ears to determine whether or not he could hear. Trump was turning towards the vibration not the sound. He suggested that since Trump could hear and my training was not working, that I should take him to Ralph Gibson in Birmingham, because he was

the best dog trainer around, and gave me one of Ralph's brochures. I called Ralph and told him about my little precious Trump, who was 11 months old at that time. He suggested that we visit him for a free evaluation, consultation, and demonstration. We did so on March 24, 2006.

Ralph To The Rescue

What happened when Ralph took Trump's leash was amazing! He was a completely different animal! He paid attention to Ralph, sat, heeled, did not pull at the leash and seemed very relaxed! I was sold! He explained simple canine behavior to me and how I needed to become a disciplinarian in a balanced, positive manner to become his pack leader because order is what he craves. I bought the beginning and advanced levels because there was a package discount and that was the foundation. After I saw Ralph's dog, Rosebud, in action, I wanted my Trump to be a stellar canine with precision moves and balanced protective abilities. I wanted a Pit Bull that would be a good example to the public. (I had become involved in lobbying against an ordinance in the City of Tuscaloosa that would have banned Pit Bulls in 2005. The ordinance was not passed by the Tuscaloosa City Council. I had multiple articles published about Breed Specific Legislation and tried to be an advocate for the breed. A good demo dog would be handy!) I did not plan to leave my Trump with Ralph, but from the response of Trump with Ralph, there was no question that he was in the right hands!

I did not realize how much I needed a break from my dog! I needed that time to realize the emotional mess I had created in our bond. I had taken all my emotional baggage from losing Dirty and expected Trump to take that on, with all my emotion that he was not Dirty and I just did not like him as much. He frustrated me! The time away from Trump was very necessary for me to be able to take a step back, relax, and come back into the picture with a fresh outlook and attitude. Spiritually and emotionally I needed the break. I went back for a visit while Trump was staying with Ralph and was very pleased with the progress. I had never seen Trump happier and more relaxed.

The beginning and advanced obedience levels training, that encompass voice sensitization, collar/leash sensitization, and non-verbal signals and body movements, were invaluable to Trump's education. Trump had it down. I needed work! The journey continued and was much more difficult for me than for Trump.

Lauren The Veterinary Technician

Shortly after we started working with Ralph, Trump and I (and the cat) moved back to my hometown to live with my mom. I began working as a Veterinary Assistant, and was soon promoted to Veterinary Technician. I had always wanted to be a Veterinarian but was afraid of blood and needles. I conquered those fears very quickly. I loved waking up early to go to work, did not mind working late (and weekends) for emergency call

because I loved caring for the animals. The past four years I have set my goal as Veterinary School. I loved being a veterinary technician because I could help fix a problem. Dog has an ear infection - I can take a sample, run a cytology, determine what organism is infecting the ear, flush the ear, and explain the diagnosis and medication protocol to the owner, under the Veterinarians' direction. Dog is critically injured or sick - euthanasia stops the pain if there is nothing else that can be done. Dog comes in with a gunshot wound to the front right leg - sedate, catheter, IV fluids, prep to amputate at the shoulder, etc. One of my favorite parts of being a veterinary technician was educating the client on what the best product or treatment was for his/her pet, so that they are well educated. Many times dog owners will come in to a veterinary clinic with a dog that is aggressive and biting. Veterinarians do not have time to deal with behavior issues. Because I have seen and heard about cases that Ralph has rehabilitated, dogs that presented with the same, or worse, issues, I know that medication cannot solve certain problems that come into a veterinary clinic. Drugs do not solve the problems and many times make the dog more unpredictable. The veterinarians that I have worked under and I have sent many people to Ralph.

Taking The Leap For A Diagnosis

While working for a large veterinary practice, I would talk to the five veterinarians for whom I worked about Trump and his issues. They would try different methods of testing his hearing and came back with different answers. Some thought he was deaf and some thought he could hear, at least at some level. One of the veterinarians, after hearing the many theories, asked if I wanted to find out for sure. I was so excited just to know! She called a professor who had worked and taught at the Auburn University School of Veterinary Medicine for over 30 years and had developed the dog hearing aid, in the 80s, and made an appointment for us. We went the next Saturday to see him in Auburn. The professor commented on how well behaved Trump was and marveled at the commands he knew how to perform. He commented that most deaf animals are very aggressive and Trump was so well behaved and gentle. Trump sat still while the doctor hooked up electronic pins all over his head. The veterinarian was performing a BAER-Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response test. The test feeds very loud, fast pings from headphones directly into each ear and a monitor picks up the response waves from his auditory system. Trump was diagnosed bilaterally deaf. We had a definitive diagnosis! It was just a fact!

It was still frustrating for me to begin training with Trump because after we left Ralph's (before we knew he was deaf) I tried to use mostly vocal commands. My timing was not precise enough with the physical commands. Over time, as my handling skills improved, the ability to communicate with Trump improved. We trained Trump for about two years before we found out he was deaf. I still held on to many emotionally sick practices like letting Trump sleep in the bed with me, because it made me feel safe. I just liked him sleeping in my bed. It was usually the most time I had to spend with him. In

addition, I started letting him get onto the couch. We have been through a lot, of my own making, that I have had to readjust. I understand now that when people are emotionally attached to their dogs they can make these mistakes. It has taken me finding his behavior intolerable, again and again, to slowly appreciate what Ralph has taught me. Today my dog does not sleep in the bed or get on the couch. I can leave his crate door open and he wants to be inside of it. He waits until I tell him he can eat when I feed him. My food, my toys, my den ... he is happy with the order I fought to impose for so long. I am happy and he is happy when we have order.

My New Mission

The experience of being in a veterinary hospital everyday, viewing the variety of canine behavioral issues, but not having a balanced, positive way, and the time, to educate the dog and owner to correct these issues has caused me to change my decision to apply to veterinary school. I could not put dogs on drugs that I know do not work. There are many great veterinarians, but there are few who can address the behavioral issues from simple to severe, as does Ralph Gibson. It has been a blessing to have him in my life, educating Trump and me, but to have the opportunity to serve an apprenticeship with him has been amazing. Whether I am cleaning kennels or educating clients and dogs I am absolutely happy every day. I believe that this approach is the best approach for dog and owner and is the correct way to live with canine companions. My life with my dog is pleasant and enjoyable because the method of training that Ralph teaches overrides Trump's hearing handicap.

So, my new mission is to use my training and experience to help others, particularly those with "special needs" dogs, to develop a healthy, ordered relationship with their "best friend"

Have you ever noticed that Dog spelled backwards is God? My dog, and yours, is His dog first and my dog second!