

Dear Dog Lover,

Our monthly story at the end of this email: “Abby’s Therapy Dog Journey”

Facebook: We’re now on Facebook, where you should find the page The Better Companion. Feel free to join us, and to post anything dog related to the topics we’ve started, or start a new dog topic. You can share pictures of your dog, ask other dog owners questions, let them guess what mix of breed you have, or just share a funny story.

Drop-In Classes: The new Nose Work class is filling fast, so please **call in to reserve your spot!** This is how it works:

Purchase a punch card or a single training session (at the facility, over the phone or online on our web page). Then we can reserve a spot for you. We’ll allow waiting list spots, so that we can fill a spot if someone drops out. If you can’t make it to the session, we need a 48hr cancellation notice, to get the chance to notify someone from the waiting list. If you don’t cancel on time, we’ll still mark you off for that hour even though you weren’t there. We allow a **maximum of 6 dogs per class for Nose Work as well as for the Rally Advanced Practice.**

Like last time you’ll find all changes from the April newsletter in **RED** below. Please, even if you’re already signed up, check the schedule below to see if your class is affected.

Enjoy the spring, and the increasing daylight with every day,
Claudia

Below you'll find:

- 1) Information on upcoming events
- 2) Dates and times of upcoming classes
- 3) How to sign up for the classes
- 4) **REVISED:** Information on the Open Play Times
- 5) This month's story: **Abby’s Therapy Dog Journey**

1) INFORMATION ON UPCOMING EVENTS:

April 18th: Skydance Paragliding is using the building for their Paragliding 101 – Introduction to this sport
Call 841-7468 (Frank) or go to www.skydanceparagliding.com for more information.

2) DATES AND TIMES OF UPCOMING CLASSES:

Drop-in classes starting May 5th:

Instructors: Claudia (NW, RAP), January (NW)
Weekly every Wednesday until June 30. July/August will be on Thursday evenings.

Outdoors classes in fenced field. **Punch card available online.**

Wednesday 6:30-7:30pm: Nose Work (maximum 6 dogs)

Wednesday 8-9pm: Rally Advanced Practice (maximum 6 dogs)

Behavior classes starting May 12th/13th:

Instructors: Rose (P1, FC), Claudia (P1, FC, P2, ES, RC),

All classes will run for seven weeks, and end June 23/24.

Wednesday 5-6pm: Puppy 1 – Preschool (first week: 6-8:30pm without the dogs)

Wednesdays 6:15-7:15: **FC or P1** (first week: 6-8:30pm without the dogs)

Wednesday 7:30-8:30: Foundation Class (first week: 6-8:30pm without the dogs)

Thursday 5-6pm: Rally College

Thursday 6:15-7:15: Puppy 2 - Kindergarten

Thursdays 7:30-8:30: Elementary School

Agility classes starting June 5th:

Instructors: Claudia, Kat, Heather

These classes will run for six weeks, with a break on July 3rd (Fourth-of-July-weekend) and end July 17th.

NEW TIMES and class order:

Saturday 9-10:15am (including set-up): Agility Puppy/Beginners

Saturday 10:30am-12pm (including change): Agility Puppy/Beginners

Saturday 11:30am-1pm (including change): Agility Skills Training

Lunch break: 1-2pm

Saturday 2-3:30pm (including set-up): Agility Sequencing

Saturday 3:30-5pm (including change): Agility Sequencing

Saturday 4:30-6pm (including set-up + change): Agility Trialing 1

Saturday 6-7:30pm (including take-down): Agility Trialing 2

Behavior classes starting June 15th:

Instructors: Claudia (HS), Heather/Claudia (P1, FC)

High School runs for 4 weeks (ends July 6th), the other classes will run for seven weeks, and end July 27th.

Tuesday 5-6pm: High School

Tuesday 6:15-7:15: Puppy 1 – Preschool (first week: 6-8:30pm without the dogs)

Tuesday 7:30-8:30: Foundation Class (first week: 6-8:30pm without the dogs)

Upcoming classes:

Behavior classes starting July 21/22:

Instructors: Rose, Claudia, Heather

Agility classes starting July 24:

Instructors: Claudia, Kat, Heather

3) HOW TO SIGN UP FOR THE CLASSES:

It's easy!!! On our webpage www.bettercompanion.com, use the menu bar on the left. You'll find a button "Classes", with the subtitle "Registration", which brings you directly to the **one registration form for ALL classes**. After clicking "enroll" at the end, you'll get to the pricing and payment page, which explains all payment options, policies, and allows you to pay online, too. You can also check out the pricing page first, to learn about prices, payment and cancellation policies. Take advantage of our **pre-registration fee** by signing up a minimum of **14 days before the start of your class**. Please read our cancellation policy on the pricing page – you almost can't lose!

Puppy 1 Preschool clients, please remember you can also purchase the **Puppy School Packet**, including P1 and P2 class. You only have to commit to the seven weeks of P1 class, and will receive a voucher for P2, valid for 1 full year! For P2 voucher holders, the voucher will be your payment. After you fill out the registration form for P2, you can email us the number of the voucher, mail the voucher to us or drop it off at the facility.

Reserve your spot! Please note **our registration policy: Only the payment will hold your spot**. Spots are reserved in the order we receive payment for them. **Always sign up for the class you want to join**, even if it could be full. Only the payment will keep you on the waiting list, in case somebody else drops out before the class starts. **Your payment is never lost**, even if the class is already full. Your payment will 1) save you a spot at the class, or 2) save you a spot on the waiting list, or 3) can be carried over to a later class, or 4) can be refunded if I couldn't get you in the class you chose, or 5) can cause me to open an overflow class 😊. Just as a note: I sometimes get up to three dogs per class moved in from a waiting list before the class even starts. **We now can take credit card payments over the phone and at the facility.**

4) SOCIAL HOUR - OPEN PLAY TIMES:

Come with your dog for one hour of dog play and dog owner social time. Each dog must be supervised by an adult handler, one dog per handler only. Vaccinated dogs only (5-way/DHPPi, dogs over 6 mo: Rabies, Bordetella). We also require having the dog dewormed or a fecal sample checked.

Please note the following dates when we'll be **closed for Open Play Times:**

May 31: No OPT, no daycare (Memorial Day)

July 5: No OPT, no daycare (Independence Day celebration)

First-timers: bring your vaccination papers, we want to see them! Dogs over 6 months, please for the first time come on a Friday, when Claudia and Frank are managing the play times. After that, we'll discuss with you which hour will be best and if you can come Mondays as well.

Fee: \$7 at the door or punch card \$35 for 6 visits.

Our Open Play Times (indoors) have become a safe playground for dogs of any size due to the newer size restrictions for each group. Only timid and absolutely non-reactive dogs can be slightly heavier than the group limit. The group from 7-8pm is limited to 8 dogs, and reservations can be made in advance. Just call us and we explain the details.

Every Monday AND Friday:

5-6pm: toy and small dogs and puppies up to 25#

6-7pm: puppies and medium adult dogs 30-50# (giant breed puppies can be heavier)

7-8pm: Large adults over 60# (indoors: 8 dogs max; outdoors: 10 dogs max)

8-9pm: Large Dogs over 60# (if needed)

You can check the web page www.bettercompanion.com for info on classes, facility, and schedule, read testimonies from other students, print out the registration form...

Or contact us by email or phone (see below).

5) ABBY'S THERAPY DOG JOURNEY

This time I have a story sent in by a client. Some of you might remember the jar we had out to collect for her. With this story, she says thanks to all the ones who contributed to her cause and to all the warm wishes and thoughts she received.

Here is Deb's and Abby's story (and Jer's!):

Abby" came to our home three years ago as a 6-7 month old rescue, although WHY such a wonderfully sweet dog was in rescue still has me shaking my head in amazement. She is a 50 lb. Icelandic Sheepdog mix (mixed with we don't have a clue what, nor do we care). Abby seems to have a built-in "Awwww" factor, with a face as gentle and lovable as her personality and soft fur made for petting and hugging. If ever there was a custom-made therapy dog, Abby is it.

When Jerry suffered a near fatal accident while felling trees in September, '09, he was hospitalized for two long months - and is still in out-patient therapy as of April, 2010. I spent those first months in Anchorage with Jerry; first for two weeks in Alaska Regional Hospital's "Alaska House" rooms for spouses/family of patients, then a couple weeks at a condo near the hospital generously offered by a church friend. Eventually I ended up in another friend's basement bedroom - where I was finally able to bring my two dogs,

"Abby" and tiny "Pocket" to stay with me. With no other "family" living in Alaska, what a comfort it was to have my dogs there to talk to and bring a small touch of normalcy to my life.

Right from the start, Abby made it clear she preferred accompanying me to the hospital most days even though she had to remain in the car at first. The month she had spent alone - left home in our fenced yard with just a dog house and someone coming by to feed and water her once a day (there had been no choice <sigh>) had been terribly stressful for her.

Abby's life had turned upside down when her "dad/pack leader" was hurt and taken away ... and then I ("mom/pack leader") left for a month, then came back and got her - only to take her to a totally unfamiliar home. Abby is an adaptive dog and was fine with this new place as long as I was there. But she'd had enough of being left behind. Her Nordic-breed winter coat allowed her to stay in my familiar if cold car in comfort (she had a blanket and toys) and it turned out to be good for ME, too. I had a reason to take breaks from sitting with Jerry and walk the dog around the hospital grounds (always with a baggie in my pocket <smile>) every few hours. It wouldn't have occurred to me to take long walks if it hadn't been for the dog in the car.

About a month into Jerry's recovery from the severe traumatic brain injury, he was only partially-conscious and not cognizant much of the time. He recognized me but in his semi-lucid state he didn't realize he was in a hospital bed, that the irritating brace on his neck was due to compression fractures or even that he had a big, heavy cast on his broken ankle. He felt trapped and when he was awake he was obsessed with "getting up and going home" ... from wherever he was. The fact that he couldn't even *sit up* unsupported didn't register.

In late October, nurses had noticed me walking Abby on the peaceful walking paths - meandering through the simple garden and lawn landscaping surrounding St. Elias Specialty Acute Care Hospital. One of them suggested bundling Jerry up in a "gurney-chair"; he could be securely strapped in, brought semi-upright and rolled out into the day room where we hoped he might notice Abby outside the floor to ceiling windows. Jerry was having a hard time "coming back" to the real world - we thought maybe seeing his beloved dog might trigger a response.

It took a lot of effort on the part of the staff to accomplish the transfer and get Jerry to the day room. I ran out to the car and brought Abby to the window ... but no matter how the nurse and aide tried, they couldn't get Jerry to focus beyond the window. Not wanting to quit, I brought her to the side door of the day room and motioned the nurse over. After a short discussion and assurances that Abby was not only gentle and well-behaved but totally up-to-date on all her vaccinations ... they decided that bringing Abby inside *briefly* was worth trying. Once inside, she saw (or perhaps smelled) Jerry immediately and walked up to the big blue gurney-chair without hesitation. Jerry was staring off into space, still in his own little world but Abby knew her "dad" with just one sniff and buried her nose in the blankets, seeking contact.

I knew the very second Abby found Jerry's hand under the blankets. She froze, leaning gently against him and her tail began a slow, contented swishing. I pulled Jerry's hand out from under the blanket so Abby could lay her head in his lap, hoping he could see her better. I was ecstatic when he voluntarily moved his hand to the top of her head and started feeling it. His eyes worked hard to focus downward - wearing an expression that was a combination of confused surprise and pleasure. This man, who up to that day had not managed to put a sentence together that related to where he really was ... ran his hand over his dog's soft, luxurious fur, *felt* her distinctively rounded ears - one upright and one cocked over. His hand stopped, felt again and then gently patted her head and said, clearly; "You're a good girl, Abby".

Jerry spent barely two minutes "visiting" with Abby that day. He fell back asleep almost immediately after uttering this sentence, but that was all right. For a moment, he had been "here" in our world. More important - his nurse said that Jerry "woke up" about 2 AM the following morning and was truly lucid. He knew where he was (in the hospital) and asked questions about his accident - how long had it been, what had happened, etc. The trigger had worked! It wasn't a miracle cure ... Jerry didn't go from bedridden and brain injured to suddenly all better by any means, but he had turned a major corner in his recovery and even his doctor agreed that the physical connection with Abby was probably what had triggered it. His recovery really took off at that point. He was lucid more and more and for longer periods each day. Finally, the therapists were able to seriously start the long road towards rehab.

Knowing I couldn't keep sneaking her in, I decided to do whatever was involved to get Abby approved for regular visits. An email sent off to Claudia Sihler, our favorite dog trainer, gave me the direction I needed and contacts to get me started. She also offered to do a fund raiser to help us out - and boy, did it ever help!

The official hospital bureaucracy was daunting, but a *prescription* for Pet Therapy visits written by Jer's doctor cut through the red tape. A vet visit was scheduled for a full check-up and a trip home to Wasilla was fit in so I could gather Abby's vaccination records and grooming tools. A couple of days later Abby and I hit the local "do-it-yourself" doggy wash so she would be clean and beautiful.

A local Anchorage vet did the health exam and evaluated Abby for temperament. He had to fill out a form stating that in his opinion, the dog showed no inclination towards being aggressive and had the appropriate gentle, patient personality needed to be in a health care facility. He took this responsibility seriously and really put her through her paces. By the time he was finished, Abby had another form in her file - this one stating she was cleared for any daycare facility on Fort Richardson <grin>.

A week after our initial "sneak visit", I was able to bring Abby and her folder of official paperwork to the hospital. Early that morning, I dropped Abby off at PetCo for what they call a "Mini-Make-Rover" <smile>. This includes a thorough "misting" with a good skin and coat conditioner, full brush-out, nail trimming and buffing, ear cleaning, teeth

cleaning and general "polishing". She walked out looking SO beautiful!

When we walked into the hospital reception area, we were both ready. Abby's paperwork was accepted for "personal pet visits by the patient's own dog". Not exactly full-fledged therapy dog credentials, but good enough to accomplish what we needed. From then on, Abby was allowed to visit with Jerry as often as I wished as long as I kept to our "official agreement" including thorough grooming and cleanliness, attentive leash control and visits that coordinated with his therapy schedule.

In coming and going from the hospital day room, Abby and I encountered staff and occasionally patients and their families. Abby was a huge hit with everyone she met and I quickly realized how much she was brightening lives other than just Jerry's - and enjoying every minute of it.

In spite of our own medical crisis ... or perhaps because of it, I began training Abby as a "real" therapy dog. It would be a lot of work - the test/evaluation was pretty intense with quite a few "pass/fail" exercises to learn, but I thought Abby could do it ... and it would give me something to think about other than Jerry's ongoing recovery, medical bills, insurance claims and the scary unknown "future" I understood only too well what was lurking out there - all part of coping with the ongoing rehabilitation of a spouse with a disabling traumatic brain injury.

I contacted the Delta Society and requested information on training a therapy dog. That was early November, 2009. I purchased a Delta Society "Home Study Guide" training book (it's a BIG book) and started reading and training Abby myself. There was quite the learning curve, and it all had to be fit in around Jerry's therapy and doctor appointments. It succeeded in giving me an outside focus and kept me from dwelling on our situation to the point of falling apart. Training Abby to the necessary level took several months, but being able to "practice" our new skills at the various rehab facilities Jerry was sent to (each of which had their own rules and regulations to learn and adhere to for "pet therapy visits") was remarkably helpful.

Our friend and dog trainer, Claudia, had followed through with her fund-raiser (a jar set out during her dog training classes <smile>) to help me cover Abby's therapy dog training costs and the evaluation and registration fees. She knew all of our own money was going towards medical bills. Claudia's professional and financial help - and her moral support as a friend - went a long way in keeping me on track with our training. In fact, her fund-raiser brought in enough to allow me to enroll Abby in her first Agility classes on Saturdays, too - good exercise for both of us, useful (essential) socialization around other dogs for Abby and a reason to get out one day a week without Jerry ... which turned out to be a true sanity saver once he was home from the hospital with me as his sole caretaker. A dear friend committed to coming to our house every Saturday (for over two months!) to stay with Jerry while Abby and I were off at class. What a blessing!

On March 13, 2010, I drove to Anchorage with Abby for our official Delta Society "Pet

Partners" team evaluation. It included a written test (for me), a physical exam for Abby and a 10-part aptitude and obedience test for the two of us together. What an experience. But most important ... <big smile> **We PASSED!**

Our signed and approved application packet has been mailed and when our official Delta Society ID badges come in, we will be ready to start "paying forward" for all the good things our local hospitals and rehab facilities have done for Jerry. We can help brighten the lives of other patients and their families the way Abby has brightened Jerry's life during this long ordeal; bringing a smile during a difficult speech therapy session, offering a hug during a break in physical therapy ... just being there by Jerry's side (and mine) when the going was rough. It's amazing how soothing the mere presence of a gentle animal can be on a "bad day".

I know Claudia and her "Better Companion" dog training school realizes how big a part they played in helping us gain our official, registered Delta Society Pet Partner designation. I want to also thank all the wonderful "dog people" who donated to the "Help Jerry & Abby" jar - Claudia deposited the donations to the "Frosty Fund" set up at Wells Fargo - it was such a blessing. I would like to thank you ALL ... you know who you are.

In the meantime, Abby and I will begin actively "visiting" where we are needed, and we will also be continuing our agility classes. Go figure! How was I to know this sweet, quiet dog was hiding such a powerhouse under her soft fur? Agility is helping Abby and I build an even stronger bond between us and can only HELP our Therapy Dog work.

We have been truly blessed. Jerry is recovering at near record-setting rates and although still in therapy, he is doing better all the time. And I, for one, will always believe a big part of his recovery is due to a [previously] unwanted, half-grown stray from the Mat-Su Animal Shelter. :)

Sincerely,
Deb Frost & "Abby"

Spring Promise Farm, Wasilla, Alaska
NPGA, PBA, NADAC, Delta Society

"Learn to tolerate hope."

Anything you want to share???
Claudia