

Life & Times

Written by Carla Genender, Florida Dog Magazine, Fall Issue 2007

Near the entrance to a subdivision in Suffolk County, New York, stands a crape myrtle tree covered with large yellow and white flowers. It was planted by neighbors in memory of Cody, a golden retriever who passed away on June 5, 2007. The tree is positioned so that it is visible from inside the house where Cody lived. Within that house is a box filled with hundreds of cards and notes, written to Roy and Lois Gross from people who knew Cody. Next to the box is a pile of newspaper columns that announce Cody's death and recap his life. A DVD preserves televised coverage of his life and death. At the suggestion of an officer of the SPCA of Suffolk County, a charitable foundation was established in Cody's name.

Why would the death of a dog inspire such reaction? If you were fortunate enough to have crossed paths with Cody, you would understand. I met him several years ago when I was looking for dogs to include in my first book. He was with Lois outside a bagel shop in South Florida. There was something about Cody that was magnificent. Maybe it was his soulful eyes, the way he held himself with great dignity, the coat that was the thickest I have ever seen on a Golden Retriever. Maybe it was all this and more, but what I do know is that Cody had a presence that drew me to him like a magnet. I introduced myself to Lois and asked if I could have Cody photographed for my book. After spending the afternoon of the photo shoot with him, I realized that Cody was as beautiful on the inside as he was on the outside.

For those who didn't know Cody, it's hard to explain his essence or why he meant so much to so many people. The answers are found in how Cody lived, not how he died.

Cody's family consisted of Roy and Lois Gross and their son and daughter. Roy is the head of the SPCA in Suffolk County, New York. He and Lois are avid animal lovers who are devoted to helping animals in need. They divide their time between homes in Suffolk County, New York and Palm Beach County, Florida.

Cody joined the family in 1996, when the Grosses' teenaged son and daughter asked for a Golden Retriever puppy. The Grosses already had an older female Golden Retriever named Chelsea, a rescue found wandering the streets. They also had three former feral cats and a ferret. Still, it didn't take much arm-twisting for Roy to agree to a puppy. Their vet referred them to a reputable local breeder, and when Roy saw 13-week old Cody, it was love at first sight. Who could resist a cuddly bundle of thick fur with an oversized head and eyes that made your heart melt? Cody quickly adjusted to Chelsea, the cats, and the ferret, and he was just as quickly accepted by them. They hung out together, wandering the house

job as a therapy dog and mascot for the SPCA. It was also the means by which Cody got to know many of the people who mourn him today.

Roy decided to have Cody certified as a therapy dog when he and Lois became empty nesters. Roy knew that Cody was a natural because everywhere they went, people were drawn to him. They stopped to pet him, get kisses from him, and talk about him; many wanted to pose with him for pictures. Cody loved the attention; he was happy to be pet, extremely well behaved, and gentle. Part of Roy's job with the SPCA is to make presentations at schools, churches, and youth organizations



in an odd-looking herd. The kids enjoyed Cody's warm affection, enthusiastic playing, and silly antics. Lois and Roy were equally enchanted.

At first, Cody was simply a pet; a much loved, precocious, inquisitive puppy with a unique personality. During this time he was introduced to a hobby that became one of his passions. One day when Roy was taking his daughter for a ride on his Harley Davidson Police motorcycle, he put Cody in the sidecar with his daughter. Cody was hooked, and for the rest of his life he and Roy attracted attention wherever they went on the motorcycle and sidecar, whether on an outing for pleasure or as part of Cody's

about how to treat animals. Once Cody became a therapy dog, he went with Roy to these presentations. Cody loved the kids, and the kids loved him. They enjoyed petting him while they learned about the care and handling of pets, as well as the joy of being a pet owner. Many children sent beautiful thank you letters.

Cody loved going to nursing homes, and the elderly patients found great delight in playing with him, or merely patting his head. His calm nature brought peace to many residents who had given up their own dogs. A visit from Cody was always sure to be the highlight of the day.

Cody also served as a therapy dog for Roy. In his job as head of the Suffolk County SPCA, Roy is often involved in gruesome animal abuse cases. Cuddling with Cody when Roy came home helped him cope with the horrors he had seen.

Cody's most public role as a therapy dog was for the first responders at Ground Zero in the two months after 9/11. When the Suffolk County SPCA sent its mobile Canine Mash Unit to take care of the search and rescue dogs, Roy brought Cody with him. Reflecting on this experience, Roy said, "What Cody did at Ground Zero was remarkable. Workers couldn't speak from the anguish. They would drop to their knees, start petting him, and cry. Having Cody by our side made our work easier to bear. When depression hit hard, Cody was there to hug and give us strength to continue our vital role." Roy recalls that Cody also helped people who were looking for loved ones, or simply there to see for themselves the unimaginable devastation. "People were walking around like zombies, with no expression on their faces. When they saw Cody, they wouldn't even ask if they could pet him. They would put their arms around him, and weep. Some would open up and start to talk."

Cody received many honors and awards for his work at Ground Zero. For example, in 2002 he was invited to be on the altar at the Blessing of the Animals at St. John the Divine in New York City, and he was the star of the CBS television show *Hometown Hero*. Cody never stopped offering comfort to the grieving families as he was present at the September 11th memorial ceremonies year after year for the rest of his life.

Cody became the SPCA Mascot as a result of accompanying Roy when he made media and personal appearances on behalf of the SPCA. Roy and Cody often traveled in the SPCA's Canine Mash Unit to fairs, spay/neuter clinics, and rabies clinics. Cody loved traveling in the Mash Unit, and people loved seeing him.

Roy and Cody also led numerous pet walks as fundraisers for the American Cancer Society, the Long Island Alzheimer's Association, and other charities. At these events, people of all ages wanted their photo taken with Cody in the motorcycle side car. Albums and picture frames in countless homes display these irreplaceable photos.



Cody became a celebrity. He was featured in books, magazines and calendars; and sometimes was recognized by people who had seen him on television. Roy, with Cody at his side, was often interviewed on *Pet Talk*, *The Family Pet*, and other television shows. Subjects included hot weather tips, hurricane preparedness, and the proper care of animals. Sometimes Roy used Cody to demonstrate the tips he was discussing.

In spite of all the work he did with Roy, Cody had a very active "civilian" life. Cody and Roy were always together at home. Inside, they often sat on the couch and watched television. Outside, Cody stayed next to Roy and sat at the curb to watch for people and cars. Mike Casale, a neighbor, said "Cody loved everyone in the complex. He would come over wagging his tail and you would pet him. When you left him you felt better about yourself and happy inside." Linda Anello, who lived across the street from Roy and Lois in a different neighborhood, said "Cody was an incredibly loving dog. He impacted everyone who met him. Even a neighborhood child who was afraid of dogs fell in love with Cody."

The day before Cody died, he did all the things he enjoyed most. He went for a ride in the motorcycle side car to his favorite destination: the beach. He swam, fetched a stick Roy threw in the water, and rode the waves in his own style of body surfing. On the way home they stopped for ice cream, his favorite treat. At home he and Roy curled up together on the couch. He seemed in perfect health, yet the next day he was moping and

restless before collapsing. Roy and Lois rushed him to the vet. Lois sat in the backseat with Cody's head on her lap. He stared into her eyes the entire way. He was diagnosed with internal bleeding and rushed into surgery. Sadly, he did not survive.

So what is Cody's legacy? He will live on in Roy's heart forever. The tree planted in his honor is a beautiful gathering place which reminds neighbors of all that Cody gave to them. Cody's Foundation provides spay/neuter services, rabies clinics, educational programs and helps animals in need of care. He left the world a better place because of the many lives he touched with his good deeds.



Anyone wishing to make a tax-exempt donation to Cody's Foundation can contact the Suffolk County SPCA at (631) 382-7722.

Carla Genender is the author of DogSense: 99 Relationship Tips from Your Canine Companion, as well as numerous newspaper columns and magazine articles. She is currently working on her second book. You can visit her at www.dogsensebooks.com.