

The Love of a Dog

By Ellie Kahn

April, 2003



I have always owned dogs. I did have a cat named “Billy” when I was small, but he apparently wore out his welcome by killing all the neighbor’s birds and bringing them into our kitchen. We gave him to someone who needed a hunter.

My mother has a dog named Dillian, a constant companion, an occasional irritation, (he barks, she shouts at him to stop, he barks some more) and the primary object of her affection. I, personally, am convinced that Dillian is my stepfather, Les, reincarnated into a *nicer form*.

When Les died three years ago, I was not heartbroken, truthfully. He was a pretty critical, negative man at times, and I thought Mom deserved better treatment. A year after Les died, Mom bought Dillian. I immediately thought he looked quite a bit like Les. Really. Same droopy, bloodshot eyes, always analyzing and watching. My mother isn’t convinced.

The difference between Dillian and my stepfather is that Dillian always seems to be smiling. He shows this with his extremely wiggly derriere. (It apparently has to wiggle in order for the tale to wag, which it

does constantly.) He has a demeanor that says, “I love everything about you and everything about life.” When I asked my mother why Dillian was important to her, she said, “He’s a wonderful companion, he’s warm and loving, and he doesn’t criticize me.” Need a say more? An improved Les.

Research has shown that pets make a huge difference in the lives of people, and it might be especially true with seniors. According to Arlene Dynof, a staff member at Hayworth Terrace in Los Angeles, “It’s a known fact that pets prolong the life of the older person and improves their quality of life.” I sure agree.

Have you ever noticed how many homeless people have dogs? I’ve been told by many homeless folks that it’s a perfect way to have a companion, but be free to pick up and go, without ties to people. A dog is also a form of protection, and it give an otherwise very lonely, isolated person some love.

Loneliness is an issue for far too many older people. David Villaire, a social worker and case worker at Freda Mohr Senior Center on Fairfax, says that it’s a growing trend for board and care facilities to allow pets, for a good reason. “Pets are really important for older people,” Villaire says. “They are very loving and very physical, which is a lot of what isolated elders miss; they can’t touch anyone.” When there is an animal around, the touch factor raises dramatically.

I don’t know if my mother will someday need assisted living. She is developing dementia, so I thought it would be a good idea to investigate whether Dillian would be welcome if she needed to move. Jewish Family Service has a list of places that will accept pets. Most, like Hayworth Terrace say that the owner must be capable of caring for the pet.

Cambridge House, in West L.A., would not only allow Dillian, but they also have their own resident pet therapist, “Chester.”

Amy Udani, Director of Marketing and a gerontologist at Cambridge House, says Chester is a rescued dog, so this was a mitzvah for him as well as the residents there, all of whom have some stage of Alzheimer’s. Udani bought Chester as a way to keep the residents active and involved. “They help take care of him, along with watching over plants that we have in the garden for them to care for,” she says.

Another facility that allows pets is Silverado, with senior living locations in Azusa, Calabasas, Alhambra, Costa Mesa and Escondido. Udani explained to me that the growing trend is for places like Cambridge House and Silverado to provide real life settings, where there are inter-generational activities, gardening, and pets. Silverado’s philosophy is that getting Alzheimer’s should not mean the end of living. Pets are an important part of that, which I find truly exciting, since I know the joy a dog can bring.

When I called one facility and asked if they allowed pets, there was a long pause at the other end. The woman said they would have to see the pet. Kind of a canine interview, I guess. Dillian probably would not pass, because he does have that barking problem I mentioned, and he also insists on sharing most everything my mother and anyone else nearby is eating. Also, there was the time that he ran away and got stuck in a sewage pipe and my mother had to crawl in after him. Please don’t tell anyone; I want to keep my options for Mom open. For now, Mom’s probably lying in her bed in North Carolina, trying,

with difficulty, to get enough room to sleep, because Dillian is sprawled out in his usual spot, on Les's side of the bed.

Ellie Kahn is an oral historian, psychotherapist, freelance writer and the owner of Living Legacies Family Histories in Van Nuys, CA. Her e-mail address is ekzmail@gmail.com

© 2003 Jewish Journal and Ellie Kahn