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Courier Feature

Pooch with a personality



Belle has a gift... she touches people in a positive way!

It's funny who you remember from high school and why. I remember Luann Reynolds even though she was three years ahead of me. I knew where she lived, I knew her parents' names (Barbara and Sonny Reynolds) and I knew they owned a business. But the main thing I remember about Luann is how much she loved horses (and still does). I remember going to the old ball park/fairgrounds and, most every time, I'd see Luann with her husband, Nicky Stallings. They'd be riding their horses on the grounds. I don't know why those memories stayed with me all these years. But they did. The word Luann equaled horses... period! So you can imagine how curious I was when I was told about an interesting story about Luann and her dog – not her horses!

Last January, Luann became the proud owner of a miniature Australian Shepherd. She named her Belle. Luann already had a full-sized Australian Shepherd. But there was something about one of the smaller ones that caught her attention. "Nicky and I had talked at length about getting a pup. They usually cost a thousand dollars and we felt that was just too much. But it was meant for me to have one," Luann said. "A woman, who just happened to raise these dogs, came here and bought one of our horses. While she was here, she spotted one of our colts, but she didn't have the extra cash. Then, Nicky suggested we trade – a colt for pick of her next litter. And, that is what we did."

Why did Luann want one of these miniature dogs? I wondered the same thing, especially since she already had one of that breed. "I wanted a companion. That is it, pure and simple. My children were gone from home, in college, and I just wanted a companion. I wanted one I could take everywhere, from the bank, to the feed store, to the post office. The larger dog didn't have the temperament to do that. And that is what I did from day one with Belle," Luann stated.

Luann was recovering from shoulder surgery for the first few weeks she had Belle. "I noticed she would come and lay in my lap, quietly, for long periods of time. It was like she knew I did not feel well. But I really didn't think that much about it. Because she'd spent every minute of every day with me, she didn't know any different," Luann recalled.

Later, Luann's thoughts of Belle changed, drastically. "I was in a medical waiting room and I let Belle sit in the floor. There was a small child sitting beside us – a child I believed was autistic. After about 30 minutes, he started petting Belle and looking at her. The mother was astonished at what she'd just seen. She started crying and asked if she could buy Belle. The mother explained that her child had never made eye contact with anyone or anything. Course, I told her I couldn't sell her, but it was at that moment I knew Belle had a way of touching others in a very positive way."

Luann went on to tell me about another time when Belle by-passed a small child and went directly to an adult woman who was suffering from cancer. Belle went to the woman, placed her head on the woman's knee and her sadness appeared to drain from her body... if only for a few moments.

Then there was the time in a store when Luann heard a parent having a difficult time with her children. "I just walked over near them and the children stopped their bickering and started petting Belle. Just like that, their feelings and attitudes changed. That's what Belle does," Luann added.

Keep in mind here, Luann has not trained Belle to go up to people like this. The only training she has done is basic obedience training, like sit, stay and come.

I know what you're thinking? Why in the world would Luann even care about these strangers? Why would she take time to carry Belle around to all these places? The answer is simple. She's noticed Belle has a gift and she wants to share it – plain and simple.

How and why did she notice? It's because Luann is a retired special education teacher and she easily picks up on things like this. During her career, she used dogs and cats from time to time as part of her teachings. In addition, she used her horses to help a child regain her balance. To say the least, Luann knows the power of animals.

But it goes deeper than that. Luann grew up knowing what it was like to need a little cheering up every now and then. Her sister,



Luann and Belle

Melinda, was six years younger. She suffered from spina bifida (a malformation of the spine). Barbara and Sonny were told she'd not live to the age of three. She passed away in 2001 at 36. "I grew up caring for others because of what I'd seen happen to my sister. I remember the day I decided to enter the special education field. School had been called off due to snow. I went to Melinda's classroom to get her and when I arrived I heard her teacher say, hurry up and get "this" out of the way. She was talking about Melinda as if she was an object, not a child with feelings. I said some bad things to her and was suspended and should have been. That was all I needed to devote my life to helping others where I can. It's no longer in a classroom, but any room in which I take Belle," Luann commented.

Another person who heavily influenced Luann's decision to become a teacher was Emma Hailey. She was the special education teacher at SCHS for many years. "I did not have her in class, but I knew what an inspirational person she was and how she cared so much for each of her students. She did not treat them like they were so different," Luann commented.

One of Luann's favorite places to take Belle is to the Smith County Health Care Center. I traveled along one day just to see what goes on. I have to admit,

I was amazed at how Belle maneuvers the halls and rooms. We stopped by to see somebody I'd not seen in years, Roxanne Rollins Bay. "It feels like I'm at home again with my dogs and cats when I see Belle. If I am having a bad day, she just changes it for me. This is just such a good chance for me to show some love," Roxanne said.

Luann always makes time for one of her long time friends, Johnny Johnson. He escorted Luann's sister to their high school prom. Belle did not hesitate for one second before she jumped up in his arms. Yes... she was looking for some of Johnny's chips and a big old wet dog kiss! Which Johnny was and is always happy to supply!

Then we stopped by to see another resident I'd not seen in a while, Polly Wright. (The wife of dentist Bob Wright). "I look forward to seeing Belle. I used to take my dog to see my mother when she was a resident at McKendree Towers in Nashville. So, I really know the power of the animals to brighten a person's day. I think she knows who loves her and that's what makes her so special," Polly said.

So what makes Belle so special? Truth is, nobody knows. It's just the way it is! And who cares? The bottom line is that Luann knows Belle has a gift and she wants as many people as possible to benefit from it. "I think Belle would be able to help children in our schools. I've seen boys and girls who typically do not read, sit down and read to dogs. There are crisis situations, with offices like children's services where I know Belle would be able to help those children feel safe and calm – even it is just for a few minutes," Luann stated.

I also watched Luann's face as we visited the folks in the health center and you know what? I saw what Belle did for Luann. It made her happy to know that others were enjoying Belle's presence. "Oh yes, I get just as much out of it as they do. It's my therapy, too, and I love every minute of it."

So the next time you hear about a dog that needs a home, or the next time you go out to feed that dog of yours that you've chained to a pole – the dog you never play with – think of Belle. Who knows, you may just have the key to whatever is ailing you in a four-legged furry creature that only wants to be loved!

Oh, I almost forgot something. It was very nice to have gotten reacquainted with Luann. And, while I'll never forget my early memories of her, I have new ones now. Before I left Luann, she told me her only goal is to touch as many lives as possible... to bring a smile to their faces. She readily admitted that sounds "corny" and "cliché", but she means every word of it. I saw it for myself. Maybe one day you can see it. Better yet, I hope you get to feel it.



Howard Cannon is one of the many residents at Smith Co. Health Care who like to play catch with Belle.



Luann and Melinda with their parents, Sonny and Barbara



Rosanne Bay, a resident at Smith County Health Care, says Belle makes her day when she comes for a visit.



Jimmy Johnson, a resident at Smith Co. Health Care, gives Belle a kiss. Jimmy escorted Luann's sister, Melinda, to their high school prom.

Visions of Smith County