

The Photo Gallery

Category: Animals

written by Jo Kaufman | September 8, 2018

By the time I met Leslie, Huntington's Disease had wreaked its havoc: every part of her body jerked and twisted uncontrollably, robbing her of the ability to walk or speak. But that didn't stop her from communicating, and she came as close to talking as she was able when she saw me, along with my dog Kobe. Following some very animated but indecipherable sounds, she used sign language to make herself understood. Her rocking motion let me know that she wanted to cradle Kobe in her lap.

It wasn't easy to position him, and he often got bonked by a spastic hand or elbow but he understood—in the way that dogs do—that Leslie needed him. That holding him and stroking him connected her to a world she could no longer explore.

We'd been introduced to Leslie five years before, during one of our Animal Assisted Therapy visits. I guessed her to be in her late forties. She was a permanent resident of the facility and her room, an especially large, corner room, was decorated with animal photos and posters of every shape and size. There were horses and zebras, lions and pumas, emus and owls and, of course, dogs and cats. With her head swaying from side to side, Leslie eagerly pointed each one of the animals out to us.

We visited twice a month and always made sure to stop by her room, disappointed when the door was shut: maybe she was napping or having a treatment. Kobe stared at the closed door, pawed it and then sat down, waiting for his friend.

One day her care-taker asked if I'd take some photos of Leslie and Kobe together, which were then printed on large sheets of paper and soon joined the menagerie on her wall. At the beginning of every visit, she motioned wildly to her favorite picture: Kobe and Leslie nose to nose. I liked to imagine her eyes settling on that photo every night before she fell asleep, smiling when she did, remembering the feel of his fur.

Kissing the top of a dog's head is sometimes all you need.

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