

Best Dog in the World

Category: COVID-19

written by Lisa Walker | April 14, 2020

Gavin Tarzan Walker is the best dog in the world. But aren't they all?

I met Gavin in Alaska, in prison. I was working as a physician assistant in a women's prison where inmates worked with a professional dog trainer and were paired with shelter dogs to prepare them for adoption. The dogs live 24/7 with the inmates, who provide them with training and companionship for eight weeks.

Gavin was a medical team favorite. The admin for the unit would constantly sing his praises, saying she'd adopt him if she didn't already have a menagerie at home. Gavin was a rambunctious, affectionate pit bull mix. The nurse in the unit said she thought his name should be Tarzan, so we made that his middle name. He came home with us to New Hampshire when we left Alaska in May of 2013, and he's lived up to every prediction and expectation. He's faithful, smart, loving. An amazing companion to my retired husband. A dog with a sense of humor. He's even won over family members with a lifelong fear of dogs.

Seven years later to the month, in the midst of a global pandemic that is taking thousands of human lives, we are fighting for Gavin's life. Out of nowhere, he developed a protein-losing enteropathy in August of 2019—doggy Crohn's disease. He's lost 15 of his 85 pounds, is on high-dose steroids, cyclosporin, three antibiotics, an antacid, and aspirin and can eat only "novel" proteins and carbohydrates (which means a diet of venison, bison, duck, potato, and oatmeal). His abdomen is intermittently swollen with fluid and his appetite sporadic. His blood levels (albumin is an important marker of remission) trend upward then tank suddenly.

As COVID-19 began to take hold of our lives (and everyone else's), feelings emerged that were terribly familiar. We've lived with uncertainty and frustration for months, throwing everything at Gavin's invisible, mysterious disease, trying to stop its relentless pursuit of our beloved pup. We haven't made any plans or traveled and we've barely left the house—frightened to leave him alone. A sense of dread has pervaded our days, weeks, months. We know how it will end, but the question is when?

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? For now, I am grateful to be able to work from home and have Gavin snoring on his bed at my feet: a silver lining in the midst of all of this heartbreak and uncertainty.

Lisa Walker

Thornton, New Hampshire