

Westie Provides Love, Stability in the Midst of Nomad Lifestyle

West Highland Terrier Riley is a therapy dog and also helps kids with learning needs. The WFA is pleased to profile our Halloween photo contest winner Riley and share his moving story with you.

By Teresa Barnes

When Toni Kusmack rescued her dog, Riley, she never expected he would become the stability she needed in her life. Her almost nomadic career required frequent moves and extended travel, something she knew could be difficult for dogs and something of paramount concern as she looked for a pet that would fit into her busy lifestyle.

She knew her job with Bechtel would require uprooting often but having a dog by her side would be a huge comfort for her as she moved from place to place. Meanwhile, she was grieving a recent loss of her Scottie mix who had been part of her life for years. Friends encouraged her to consider rescuing a Westie.

Toni found Riley and he seemed to readily accept the challenge. For 12 years, the Westie has provided comfort, compassion and companionship not only to her but to so many others along the way.

“I love terriers. I tell you, I am in love with the breed,” she said.

When Toni was looking to adopt, she was going through difficult days with her mother who suffered from dementia. She and her family were moving her into an assisted living center that could provide the services she needed as her condition worsened.

At the time, Toni was living in San Diego and her mother was in New Jersey. Her brother, who lived nearby, was orchestrating the move while Toni made preparations to help with logistics from afar but travel back to NJ for moving day. Eleven-month-old Riley came into her life on the very day the moving truck arrived at her mother’s home. The bouncing, playful puppy provided a much-needed distraction from the tensions and emotions of the day for Toni and her mother. The puppy captured her heart and comforted them as a life’s worth of memories gave way to a new beginning.

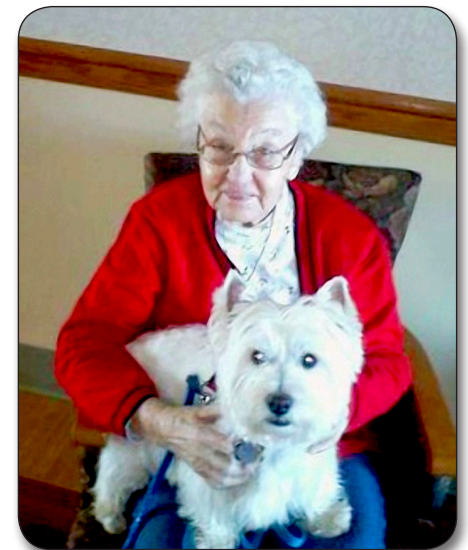
On what could have been an extremely confusing and agitating day, especially for someone suffering from profound memory issues, Riley kept the two balanced and calm.

In the months and years following her mother’s move until her death three years ago, Riley provided comfort and support for her mother and many fellow residents of the assisted living center. On Toni’s bi-annual trips to New Jersey, Riley became a welcome visitor. “They allowed him to come into the assisted living. He was so good with the people but he couldn’t understand the tennis balls on their walkers.”

Since adopting Riley, Toni has moved five times including making their home in California, Alaska, Virginia, Texas and in New Mexico, their current home. She subscribes to a tried-and-true routine she follows in preparing and leading up to the move to help Riley make the change, as well. When the movers arrive at her home, she



Riley as Superman



Amelia and Riley

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Riley's Collection of Rubber Chickens

and Riley spend time at a hotel until all of their things are loaded and shipped. Then, they make their way to their new home together.

Toni carries Riley's crate, couch and bed with them to signify a sense of calm and normalcy for him and to ensure he feels safe and secure. As a result, Riley seemingly breezes through the frequent moves.

Riley also has lots of toys that help ground him in the midst of travel and transition. He has a special affinity for a hand-me-down plush cow toy that had belonged to Toni's Scottie. "He parades it out every morning," Toni said. "He shows it to me and then hides it under the dining room table." He wants Toni to appreciate his toy as he does but he doesn't want her to get too close to it. "If I cuddle with the toy too much at bedtime, he will drop it by the side of the bed."

A collection of rubber chickens makes its way on each move with Riley. "They are a big part of his life," Toni said about the funny-looking chickens. His favorite one? A rubber chicken dressed like Elvis.

Another move is on the horizon. Toni says she doesn't know yet where that next move will take them but says, as always, they are excited about their next adventure together.

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Request for Samples

RESEARCH PROJECT	SAMPLES NEEDED	CONTACT INFORMATION
Genetic marker for Atopic Dermatitis	Saliva swabs or blood samples from dogs with skin disease or from normal dogs 5 years of age or older from family lines free of allergies	Kim Williams North Carolina State University 919-513-7235 kdwilli4@ncsu.edu
Genetic susceptibility of Transitional Cell Carcinoma (TCC) (Bladder Cancer)	Blood samples from dogs diagnosed with TCC and dogs over the age of nine who have no known cancers	Gretchen Carpintero Ostrander Lab National Human Genome Research Institute 301-451-9390 Dog_genome@mail.nih.gov
Genetic marker for Addison's Disease	DNA from cheek cells and/or blood from affected dogs and unaffected dogs over the age of 7	Dr. A.M. Oberbauer UC Veterinary School (Davis) 530-752-4997 http://cgap.ucdavis.edu/
Clinical Features and Genetic Basis of Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF)	Blood samples from dogs diagnosed with PF and healthy dogs over age 8 without lung disease	Drs. Ned Patterson and Peter Bitterman Katie Minor (contact) University of Minnesota 612-624-5322 minork@umn.edu
Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF)	Cheek and/or blood samples from dogs diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis	Dr. Victor J. Thannickal University of Alabama Sample collection coordinated by Dr. Pamela Whiting, DVM pgwhitingdvm@aol.com 707-529-9222 (cell/text) 707-837-8101 (clinic)
Dry Eye Syndrome (keratoconjunctivitis sicca)	Dogs diagnosed with dry eye and dogs over 7 years old with no ocular abnormalities *participants must be available for appointments at UC Davis Veterinary Center (CA)	Dr. Sara Thomasy UC Veterinary School (Davis) 530-752-1770 smthomasy@ucdavis.edu

For more information about any of the above projects visit www.westiefoundation.org