

The Impact of One Passionate Dog Advocate

By Teresa Barnes

When a canine owner put her heart, soul, time and money into efforts to help not just her dog, but all dogs, especially the West Highland White Terrier breed, thousands of canine owners took notice. They joined her Facebook page and sought not only her advice but her friendship. They even helped her raise funds for much-needed research into a deadly lung disease called Pulmonary Fibrosis (PF) that ultimately claimed both of her Westies.

When PJ Kessler passed away suddenly weeks ago, we at the Westie Foundation of America and the entire Westie PF community were shocked and deeply saddened. We got to know PJ as not just a friend to Westies suffering from PF as her dogs had, but also a friend to all dog owners from around the world.

PF is deadly, and there are no current approved therapies for canines suffering from it. There are just two drugs approved in humans and though both drugs slow progression of the deadly scarring, neither Ofev or Esbriet halts or reverses the life-threatening damage in the lungs caused by the disease. They are currently unavailable for canine PF.

PJ made a positive impact on the lives of so many in the canine space. A growing group of dog owners reached out to her over the last few years since she set up a Facebook page for Westie Lung Disease (WLD/PF). Even after their dogs crossed the rainbow bridge, many remained on the closed group page to engage with PJ and other dog owners.

In early 2019, the WFA was working to set up the first canine drug study in PF with an existing drug called sobetirome used for thyroid disease in humans. WFA put together researchers from Yale and Tufts to design the protocol and worked to fund the study. The protocol came together quickly, but the funding didn't. Perhaps it was too big of a stretch for funders unfamiliar with the One Health concept in which science and research can move forward faster when veterinarians and human medical experts work together on confounding medical problems.



PJ and Tyler



When PJ caught wind of the study WFA, Yale and Tufts designed, she jumped in to help find the funds to get the study underway as soon as possible. She set up a GoFundMe and within months, she and her Facebook page dog owners had raised most of the money needed when the WFA joined them to fully fund the program. It launched in fall 2019 and stalled in early 2020 due to the pandemic. Sadly, PJ's dog, Kenny, died months after the study stopped. She still remained optimistic that the study could soon be started again and could help save the lives of so many Westies whom she had gotten to know in her Facebook group.

In PJ's memory, WFA set up a fund in PJ's name. So sorely missed, she was such an example of what one dog owner can do to improve the lives of dogs and their owners, alike, and to help move science forward faster.