

Janet's Story

(7/24/59-2/08/18)

"We don't stop playing because we get old; we grow old because we stop playing."

(Janet's favorite saying by George Bernard Shaw)

You might not remember her. She talked softly, ran her big dogs quietly and didn't call attention to herself. But she remembered you.

"Since I won't be able to enjoy my money, I want it to go towards people and dogs that can," she wrote. And with that she endowed \$1,000,000 to PAC to go towards trials, seminars, health education and a special "Malamute Trial" in honor of her dogs; Shamu, Maya and Vader.

Janet loved her Malamutes. And she loved agility. "I love the bonding that results from agility" she said, "it's almost like a joyful dance. Simultaneously we're learning to communicate with our best friends." She had a big, big heart. Unfortunately, it was under attack by a rare cancer that targeted her heart valves. In 2015 she had them replaced. The new ones were supposed to last ten years. Her health improved, she made plans to get a new puppy and even purchased "Puppy Puzzle" to help her find the right one.

It was at this time that she told me "I'm getting my will in order and I want to leave my money to activities that people enjoy. I'd like to leave some money to PAC. Do you think they could use the money?" she asked me. "You're doing great right now" I said, "so why worry about it?" "Because with this condition I don't know how much time I have." She was right. The cancer was relentless. Last January she wrote on her Facebook page, "Shamu Q'd in his first Excellent standard course, in spite of my heart not working right." (run posted here)

We were fortunate to take agility class with this amazing woman for six years. She was always positive, cheered our runs and was extremely helpful. With a "gee" and a "haw" she'd guide her big dogs around the courses. It was a joy watching them run.

She lived with her two dogs and seven Highlander Scottish cows on 7 ½ acres in the rolling hills of Yacolt Washington. She loved the great outdoors and enjoyed all types of activities including running, cycling, hiking and of course agility. A friend of hers had suggested she get a Malamute because of her active lifestyle. She got involved in agility when Maya started having behavior problems. She was hooked. She trialed as much as her Radiology schedule at Longview Radiology allowed. Often though she'd be "on call" during a trial weekend.

Last Fall as her health deteriorated, and it was harder for her to do the things she enjoyed, she told us that she believed her valves were failing again. After weeks of calling her doctor he finally ordered a cardiac angiogram. When we saw her the next Tuesday, she said the results confirmed what she'd feared—none of the valves on the right side were working. Her OHSU cardiologist put in a personal, immediate referral to have the endovascular pulmonary valves replaced by a Doctor in Seattle who had helped develop the valves.

At the same time, her OHSU oncologist also suggested that she try a new radioactive chemotherapy to fight the cancer which had proven extremely beneficial in Europe for many years. She told us that it would be available at OHSU in February. Her doctor didn't want her to wait that long she told us and was arranging to have her treated in Denver. "This is my last chance" she said.

She was optimistic and noted, "it's all a bit overwhelming, but a bit of adventure." As she'd retained 10 pounds of fluid—her job was to eat as much as possible and take lots of fluid pills to keep the edema to a minimum. I laughed when I heard this—as she would hand me care boxes of chocolates and cookies that her boyfriend had sent her, to fatten her up. She confided, "I don't have the heart to tell him I don't like sweets. So maybe you could use them for hospitality at the next PAC trial."

The following week when Janet showed up for class we noticed she was weaker, but she still ran her dogs. We offered to alternate our jump heights, so she wouldn't have to run back to back. She wouldn't hear of it and said that her doctor had given her a new prescription that would help with her energy. It did--for a week or two.

And then she didn't show up for class. When we got the email from her—she said that her doctor told her he wasn't sure she'd make it through the surgery. Janet said that she'd rather die on the operating table than to continue living like this. She had no energy to even walk her dogs. Finally, the appointment in Seattle was made in November. She survived that. Next came the experimental radioactive chemotherapy in Denver in early December. As we waited for the news from her I couldn't help but be optimistic for her as the case study she had sent us was so positive.

Unfortunately, it was anything but that.

After getting through the Denver airport with all her weird meds she had met with the physician assistant at the hospital who put in the central line for the treatment. She waited two hours for the Oncologist who was running late. When he finally showed up, her Lab results came back at the same time showing that she was too dehydrated to have the treatment. Her cardiologist had probably over treated her with diuretics she wrote. Janet suggested they send her back to the hotel room with IV fluids and she be retested in the morning. The doctor said that wouldn't be enough time. She asked if she could come back for the treatment after her fluid status was corrected and he said "no, the study is now officially closed."

This was devastating news. Janet asked if she could get the treatment in Portland as it would be FDA approved on the 1st. He told her it was extremely unlikely that her insurance would cover the treatment and that there was a good chance she wouldn't make it that long.

"So, the dice have been rolled and my fate has been sealed. I'll start with Hospice on Monday" she wrote.

We went to visit Janet shortly afterwards. We weren't sure how our friend would be faring when we opened her gate and drove up her long driveway. Agility equipment lined her front yard including a hand-crafted A frame and dog walk as well as a tree branch perched between two trees to make a 20" jump. When we pulled up to her remodeled two-bedroom log house that had been built in the 60's, she greeted us with a warm hug and her beautiful smile. She'd just been clearing up branches that had fallen in the wind storm.

As we settled into easy chairs, I looked around her cozy front room. Framed pictures of Shamu and Maya doing agility decorated the walls. A string of Christmas lights draped artfully over a rack of Reindeer antlers hung on the fireplace. Outside in a side pasture, three Scottish Highlander young cows grazed peacefully. By her side, Shamu pawed at her wanting to play. A well chewed leather glove lay on the slate floor.

She seemed to be doing a lot better than we'd feared we told her. She said that she still didn't have any appetite and still retained a lot of water. With her heart in its compromised condition she would not be able to try the radioactive treatment at OHSU. "My case was mismanaged" she told us. Spoken like the doctor she is I thought.

She was originally from Ferndale, a small town near the Canadian border. She had graduated from Western Washington University in 1982 with a Chemistry and bio-chemistry degrees. Received her PHD in Protein biochemistry from the University of Oregon and did Post-Doctoral Research in Australia. She then moved to Portland to attend medical school, residency, musculoskeletal fellowship and was a staff Radiologist at OSHU. Later I learned she also did an elective rotation in mammography in Sweden.

"I'm not a city person" she said. In 2005 she moved to Yacolt and became a partner in a radiology practice in Vancouver. Six years later she started up with Longview Radiology.

The conversation turned to how she would like her money spent. She was clear in what she wanted, “I really want to see the money go towards providing avenues which would develop and enrich the relationship and enjoyment people have with their agility dogs” she said. “More training seminars for all levels and skills in agility and canine health issues.” She also talked about the money going to charitable contributions for canine needs. “And it would be nice if PAC could sponsor an annual Malamute trial in honor of Shamu, Maya and Vader, with free entries for Malamutes and Siberians to encourage participation” she explained.

When we asked if she’d found a buyer for her home she told us that she had decided to donate her house and property to Malamute Rescue. “There’s so much land here, I’m hoping that maybe they could do boarding here as well.”

As we got up to leave she looked at Shamu by her side and said, “They miss doing agility so much. They’ll go outside and run through the equipment on their own.” She asked if she thought one of us could run Shamu if she brought him to class on Tuesday. I told her I have big dogs—just with short legs— I could give it a try.

It was great walking the course with her. It was just like old times. She walked a bit slower but kept up and told me what would work best for Shamu. She handed me a small piece of folded paper with the words she used written down and a big handful of treats. As I ran, I looked over at Janet. Her face beamed, and she looked happy. “He’s doing great” she yelled. We both were surprised at how well he ran for me. “He looks so happy” she said. So, we made plans for her to return the next week. And that Tuesday I told Shamu we had a date for the next week.

That third week when I pulled in the parking lot, Janet’s van wasn’t there. We heard that she had taken a turn for the worse. Shamu was on his way to a new agility home in Colorado. She emailed us pictures of him at the airport and buckled up in his new owner’s car. Every day until she died Janet received updates on how he was doing. The last one said “Shamu has adjusted to his new home and is bonding with the family members.” Janet died peacefully in her sleep a few days later.

Everything that Janet worked to put in place has worked out;

- PAC has created a “Janet Cares” fund to fulfill her wishes.
- Malamute Rescue hired a caretaker to move into her home.
- The seven, Highlander Scottish cows have gone to 4H homes.
- Shamu’s new owner created a Facebook page where we can follow his agility career. Go to Facebook and type in Shamu’s great Adventures.

And now it is up to us to do our part. The next time you run your best friend—run with all your heart. Enjoy every minute and play.

I still have that piece of paper Janet gave me. I look at it often and smile.

Written by Karin Pearson-King and Mary Crichton

