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Lessons From The Heart

Longtime *PetLife* writer Terry Wilson tells his personal story of how the lives and deaths of his four-footed friends turned his own life around.



By Terry Wilson

Closer to 50 than 40 it dawned on me that I've spent most of my life writing stories about other peoples, adventures and their pets. Today I would like to give 15 minutes of well-deserved fame to the animals that have befriended me over the years. I sincerely believe that everything in life worth learning I have learned from dogs.

My first teacher was my neighbor's dog, Sleepy. This aging, scruffy old hound taught me courage. He was part terrier, part shepherd with a big helping of beagle tossed in for good measure. This Heinz 57 pooch may have been constructed from spare doggie parts, but he was a 100 percent purebred friend. In fact, at the age of 10 he was my only friend. At that time I was very fat, and fat kids don't have many pals. Sleepy, on the other hand, didn't care how I looked; he liked me because I liked him. For two years I told him my problems, shared my lunches with him and napped with him under a big oak tree. Even though Sleepy belonged to my neighbor, we had adopted each other.

Terry plays a game of tug of war with his first dog, Mr. Beau Jangles, or Beau for short. Above, Wilson has now designed bereavement cards for pet owners.







Mr. Beau Jangles faces off with the convertible top of Wilson's automobile. Below, adopted dog No. 2, Little Orphan Annie.

Once, an older bully named Shamas decided to pick on me for fun. He punched me and even worse, he kicked Sleepy, even striking him with a stick. My friend never left my side.

All of a sudden, Sleepy and I both retaliated. The fight was fierce. The larger and stronger Shamas beat me about the head and shoulders, while I bit him on the leg and gave him my best version of a WWF head butt. Even Sleepy got in a few licks, and between the two of us we ran Shamas and his two sidekicks out of our yard.

It was a small victory for man and man's best friend, but it was the beginning of a lifelong commitment for me to protect the Sleepys of the world, wherever they might live. Thanks to the courage of an old dog I learned that sometimes a person has got to fight for what's right, no matter what the odds.

TAKING LESSONS ON LIFE'S ROAD

Years passed and I lost the weight, in fact I became a national martial arts champion and found a career in television and radio. The lessons Sleepy taught me had carried me all the way to Los Angeles, where I would encounter my next teacher. His name was Mr. Beau Jangles, a 40-pound, cocker-terrier mix. For 21 years he was my constant companion and friend. He taught me how to love.

Beau and I first met on the set of "Dialing for Dollars," a game show I was

directing for KCOP-TV in Los Angeles. That was back in the days of live TV, and each week we did a segment that featured an animal from the local shelter. I tried not to interact with the animals because it was too hard for me to walk away knowing that their fate would be decided in a three-minute television segment.

One day however, as I walked through the set to the directors booth, I felt like someone or something was watching me. It was then that I saw a pair of little black eyes, they locked onto mine and drew me like a magnet to a large cardboard box. Inside was a black puppy with a white patch of fur that ran the length of his nose. Although surrounded by adoring staff



members, he never once took his eyes off me. To this day, I swear he was talking to me. I started to walk away when up walked a guy named Vince. Like Shamas, he too was a bully, to his employees and to me.

The pup never took his eyes off me as Vince reached down and wrapped his hairy knuckles around the dog's waist. To my delight the pup nipped at his hand then relieved himself on the guy's wrist. Suddenly the hot-tempered stage manager opened his hand as if to slap the pup. Big mistake! I snagged his wrist midair.

"Don't even think about it," I growled.

All the time I was in the booth directing the show, I kept thinking about that little puppy. Then it came time for the adoption segment. The host of the show held the dog up to the camera and began his pitch. Instinctively, I opened the studio mike and interrupted the live broadcast, "Dave this is Terry. The dog is going home with me."

I can still remember the look on his face when the SPCA representative brought him to the control booth. Beau leaped from her arms into my lap. Deep down inside I felt like Sleepy had set this whole thing up.

Beau and I loved to wrestle. From the time he was a pup I would take him down using one of my favorite judo techniques. From a standing position I'd lean into his chest, sneak my right leg behind his left

"The crowd went wild when Beau threw me in a flawless o-soto-garo (back leg take down). I promoted him to the rank of canine black belt ..."



one, then (gently) sweep him to the floor. We played this game for about a year, then to my amazement Beau turned the tables on me. One day we were wrestling, and Beau, now no longer a pup, leaned against me, stuck his leg behind mine and threw me to the floor. He did this time and time again. After winning the California State Jujitsu Championships I brought Beau out

Wilson and his new adoptee, Annie. Below, Wilson teaches Annie a new trick at home in sunny California.

onto the mat and we did a demo. The crowd went wild when Beau threw me in a flawless o-soto-garo (back leg take down). I promoted him to the rank of canine black

belt on the spot, much to everyone's delight.

A REAL RESCUE DOG

Six years later, another dog came into my



"Malnutrition and exposure to the elements had caused the Sheltie-Pomeranian mix to lose all of her body fur. She would never have survived the storm ..."

life. It happened during one of the worst storms of the decade. In near flood-like conditions my wife spotted an abandoned dog scrounging for food in a nearby alley. The pathetic pooch was a mess.

Malnutrition and exposure to the elements had caused the Sheltie-Pomeranian mix to lose all of her body fur. She would never have survived the storm so we took her in and named her Little Orphan Annie. Vitamins, healthy food and lots of TLC were the recipe for good health and within a matter of weeks Annie regained her coat. She was a beautiful little dog who had the heart of a lion. From her I learned the meaning of devotion.

For weeks, the timid animal never made a sound and hid behind the sofa. She would only emerge to eat and only if everyone had left the room. Then one night as I lay in bed I heard a muffled "woof." I looked over to see Annie staring at me as if to say "is it okay if I talk to you?" I smiled, rubbed her chin and she spent the rest of the night making up for her month of silence. Annie knew she had a home, we bonded instantly and from that night on, she never left my side.

Beau liked and trusted everybody while Annie was very wary of outsiders. She took



When you lose your best friend—

One of two cards Wilson designed for pet owners. Inside, the card reads, "replace your tears with memories of the good times you shared together."

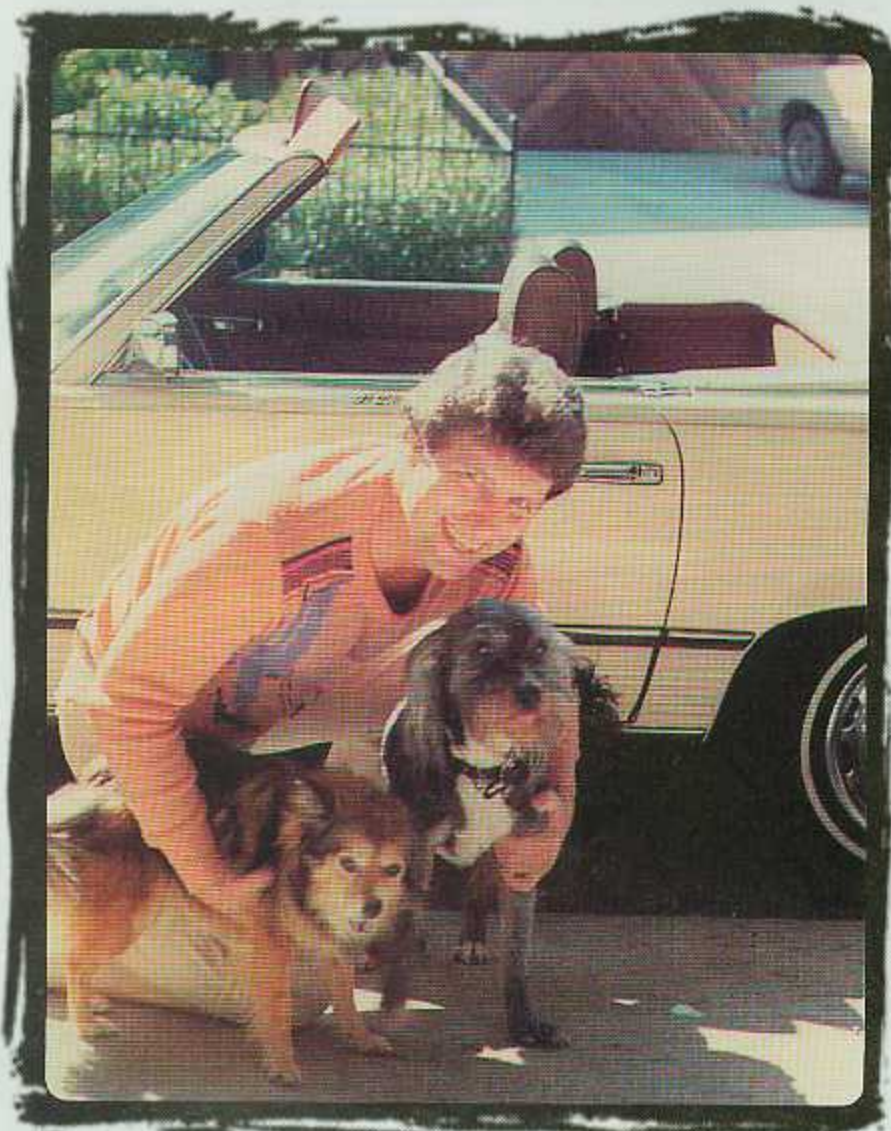
on the role of protector. In that regard she saved Beau's life, and years later would save mine.

Normally I always had the dogs on a leash, but one day I opened the door and Beau jogged down the steps and was waiting by the pool when a giant Rottweiler appeared from nowhere. He charged at Beau, fangs at the ready. I screamed for Beau to run but he just sat there, tail wagging. I was taking the steps four at a time but I knew I'd never get there in time. Suddenly Annie flew down the stairs and rammed the Rot in the ribs with her head as he was preparing to attack Beau. The blow sent the huge animal into the pool. Annie continued her assault and chased him from the courtyard.

Year's later Annie would come to my rescue as well. I had a serious case of the Hong Kong Flu; now divorced, I was alone except for Beau and Annie. My kidneys failed and I collapsed on the floor before I could get to the phone. Beau plopped down next to me and started licking my face; Annie went to the front door and began to cry. Her voice sounded more human than like a dog. Eventually her wailing caught the attention of a neighbor who peered into the window and saw me on the floor. She called an ambulance, and thanks to Annie I received treatment in the nick of time.

Years later I took a job in San Diego as host of "PM Magazine." It was there that I lost Annie. She caught phenomena and

Wilson, Annie and Beau were a true family. The two dogs even saved Wilson's life when his kidneys failed.





began to have problems from an enlarged heart. The doctors taught me how to use IVs and I turned my tiny apartment into a hospital ward. I came home three times a day to treat my little girl, but it was a battle I could not win. In 1985 Beau and I lost our protector, and he and I became inseparable.

By the time he was 19, Beau was completely blind and couldn't hear a thing, so I became his "Seeing Eye" human. My old friend still enjoyed a good quality of life however.

When Beau turned 21, his body began to give out on him. My friends told me he was only staying alive for me. As much as I didn't want to believe them, they were right. Beau began having fits and seizures that were so severe his joints would dislo-

cate with each violent convulsion.

For more than two decades he had been the emotional glue that held me together. Now I had to be strong for him. I knew what had to be done; I held Beau in my arms during his last moments at the veterinarian's office.

I went to pieces over Beau's death. I abandoned my career, turned my back on the world and retreated to Moto-Tu-Pu, a small atoll near Bora-Bora. During the next couple of years, I reflected on what Sleepy, Beau and Annie had taught me during our time together. Then, one night under a full moon, it dawned on me that their lessons were being wasted on me as I sulked in the Pacific. So I returned to America, rebuilt my career and went on to

Wilson holds memories of many a Merry Christmas with his pals, Beau and Annie. After a mourning period out of the country, he took the lessons his pets taught him and moved back to America to rebuild his career.

be a better person in all aspects of my life thanks to them.

In their honor I designed two animal sympathy cards. "Animal Heaven" features Annie standing at the gates of Animal Heaven welcoming Beau as he arrived via a golden beam of light. The second card, "Loss of a Friend," features a photo of Beau and me. Each card contains a poem I wrote that I hope may ease the pain of someone dealing with the loss of a pet. A third card is in the works that will feature my first best friend Sleepy. ■