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Therapy dog works hard for patients

She couldn't wait to get out of there. It was Friday and she'd worked hard all week – 24/7. She didn't belong to a union, she didn't speak English, and she wasn't particularly attractive.

Rescued from the dog pound, Cassie went on to a distinguished career as a therapy dog in a board and care home for elderly and frail people who need a lot of attention.

My mother is one of those people. Nearly eighty years of age, Mom brightens up every time Cassie enters her room. She is in a hospital bed with an oxygen concentrator by her side and stays in bed most of the time. When she does sit up, it is with the aid of her Medicare lift-chair.

Cassie's owner, Gail, was compelled to open the board and care home after she looked for a facility to care for her beloved aunt. The institutions she visited were just that – institutions. She wanted her aunt to be in a real home with a living room and family room. She wanted her aunt to eat meals that were prepared in the family kitchen, by loving hands.

Gail bought a home in a residential neighborhood in Scottsdale, Arizona and set about the business of meeting codes, health standards and licensing requirements, while picking out cozy furniture and lovely accessories.

She and her husband went to the animal shelter to find a dog. It was late, Gail was tired and hungry, and she hadn't bonded with any of the desperate dogs. Her husband urged her to go to the last cage at the end of a long row. She reluctantly agreed.

There she saw a large, mangy dog with long, coarse hair. She appeared to be a Collie/German Shepherd mix. The dog had Valley Fever, which was curable, but she

would not be released until she had a clean bill of health. The animal had little to recommend her.

Gail gave a soft whistle and the dog responded. The couple asked to have a closer look. The dog walked out, head down, and then plopped down in front of the cage of another dog, as if to say: "We're all in a bad situation here. Sorry, but they picked me."

Gail was moved by the dog's compassion. In spite of her illness and desperate circumstances, Cassie sought to give comfort to another dog. Gail knew she had found the perfect companion for the board and care home.

After Cassie recovered, she went to her new home and went to work. The day I was visiting my mom, Cassie was pacing around, circling Gail, itching to get out of there. She had put in a long week's work and was ready to go to the mountains where she could run free and jump into the creek. She knew it was time to go, and she couldn't wait.

"Cassie," Gail said, "Go outside and pee." Cassie flew out the door, did as she was told and tore back into the room, ready to go. We all laughed at her antics as we as we marveled at her intelligence and dedication.

When the board and care first opened, Gail and Cassie provided the day-to-day care for the residents. They went on rounds every night, checking on everyone, making sure they were OK. Gail now has a staff to watch over the residents. Cassie still makes her rounds, delighting and comforting the residents, Monday through Friday.

On Friday afternoons, Cassie waits by the front door for Gail. She's eager to return to her dog's life, carefree and simple. On Monday morning, she returns to her post, refreshed and ready to give her special kind of love to those who need it most.

On behalf of all the grateful residents, and especially my mom, I say, "thank you, Cassie" and "thank you Gail," for providing a caring home and loving heart.