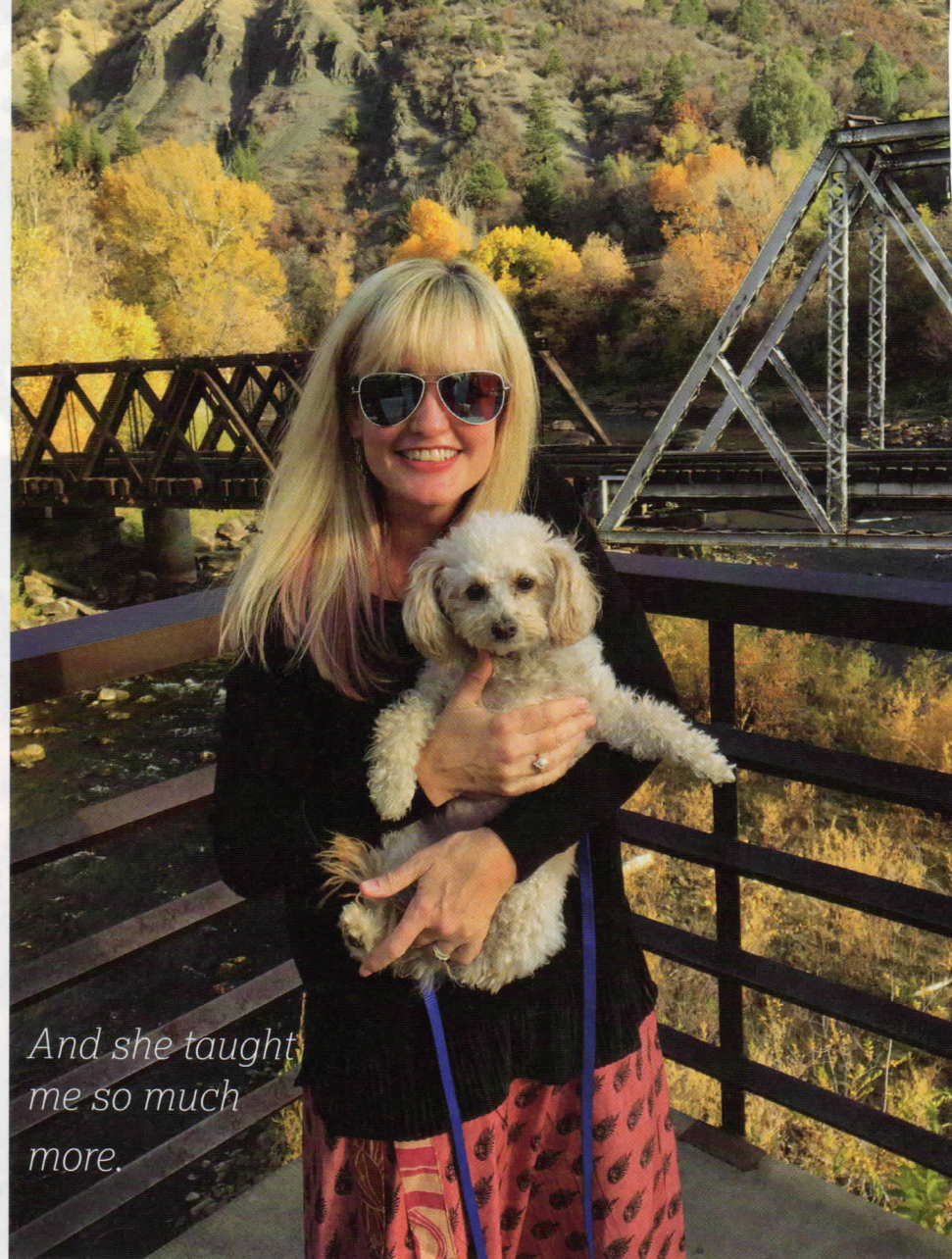


I Taught an Old Dog New Tricks

When I first heard about the homeless Poodle, it made no sense to consider getting another dog. For seven years, my husband, Bryan, and I had both been working from our cozy house in a Colorado mountain town, which we shared with Rio, a Labrador Retriever mix. Rio knew our routine—so long as he got his two off-leash hikes in the woods behind our neighborhood each day, he'd let us work uninterrupted. He's so amiable and obedient that he's a registered AKC Therapy Dog who spreads cheer at our local hospital. Life was good.

Then I got wind of "Amidala." The nine-pound Poodle was found as a stray, badly matted and with a cancerous mass the size of a baseball hanging from her chest. She was missing 18 teeth and needed another seven extractions—as well as a surgery to remove the tumor. Even after veterinary care, the 8-year-old dog had a life expectancy of "two-and-a-half to 16 months." She was purportedly a calm, affectionate dog who slept a lot and needed a loving home where she could live out her final days.

I knew she needed us and after many discussions, Bryan agreed. We decided it would feel good to make a



And she taught me so much more.

terminally ill dog as happy as possible for as long as we could. Our first night together, she wagged her tail nonstop, prancing back and forth on her teensy paws. She seemed like a real peach, so we renamed her Peach.

The weird thing was, Peach didn't seem sick. She seemed like a curious creature who liked to attack our trash cans and do gymnastics routines on the furniture. Her behavior baffled Rio. Why wouldn't she sit for treats?

He emerged as the teacher's pet to her class clown. Rio's always been eager to please, but having Peach around kicked it up a notch. He let her drink first from the water bowl.

He shared his toys. He knew her new name before she did.

Peach, meanwhile, appeared to have made it through the first eight years of her life without learning the command "Sit." After taking her to a veterinarian to make sure there wasn't an underlying medical issue (and having her anal glands expressed for good measure), I hired a dog trainer for a private lesson.

"Contrary to popular belief, you can teach an old dog new tricks," she told me.

She held a treat over Peach's nose in exactly the right spot and sure enough, Peach sat. We practiced it

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repeatedly (I needed to learn to say “Sit” just once, not multiple times) before moving on to “Leave it.” I grinned as Peach sat for me before we got into the car to go home and texted Bryan a photo. He couldn’t believe it.

Peach bonded to me quickly. My little shadow was constantly asking to lie in my lap—so I started trying to hike her off-leash near our home, rewarding “Come” with treats. The path would be covered with pinecones bigger than her legs, and I’d turn to see her doggedly powering through them. Within a week or so, she was hiking several miles a day.

I was so proud of how quickly she’d learned to trust our family and try to be good. We’d had Peach for about a month when we took her to a veterinary oncologist to see if chemotherapy could help. We’d fight this thing. After a slew of tests, the oncologist gave us incredible news: “She *had* cancer, but she doesn’t *have* it.”

Sweet relief! Pure joy! Bryan and I couldn’t believe our luck and drove to a dog park to celebrate. Still giddy, I opened the car door and before I could stop her, Peach launched out of



Two days after surgery, Peach recovers on the deck with Rio by her side.

the car, screamed as she landed, and refused to put any weight on her left hind leg. Her paw dangled in midair.

We drove back to the hospital. The people waiting in the emergency room recognized us and laughed. “Didn’t you just leave?”

Peach had torn a cruciate ligament

and needed knee surgery. Recovery took two months and involved pain medication, physical therapy, a “cone of shame,” bed rest (even when she was restless), and laser-therapy treatments.

The situation was pitiful. But soon that irrepressible dog started putting weight on her back paw for a few steps at a time instead of holding it up. A few months after her surgery, we drove to California to visit my family for the holidays and Peach walked on the beach. Eventually she started running. I will never get tired of seeing her scamper around on four legs.

That tiny dog and I have developed so much trust. Peach knows that if she doesn’t try to eat Rio’s breakfast, I’ll mix her a special concoction of kibble, water, and canned food—sort of doggy gravy. If she holds still while we put rubber booties on her feet, she’ll be allowed to hike through the snow. She trusts that I’ll carry her over icy patches on the trail—and will gently set her down as soon as it’s safe so that she can get back to exploring the forest. I know if we let her sleep on the bed, she’ll cuddle into my side and won’t move the entire night.

Peach recently had an ultrasound and X-rays to see if her cancer has returned. It hasn’t! Though she has symptoms of an enlarged heart and requires further testing, we’re staying positive. “That dog’s going to live to be 18,” my mom predicted.

With Peach’s resilience, it wouldn’t surprise me. Despite all the challenges she’s faced in her life, our sweet girl displays exuberance, grit, and love every single day. She’s my hero. In just six months, she’s adapted to a new home where she’s become an integral part of the family—the old dog’s best new trick of all. **FD**



Peach may be the smallest member of the pack, but she has no trouble keeping up with Rio and his friend Fritz.

Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder is president of the Dog Writers Association of America.