

Dear Canine Therapy Corps Supporters –

It's horrible that something as seemingly minute as a tick bite can change the course of someone's whole life. But that is exactly what happened to my daughter, Carter.

It was July 2008, and we were in Reedville, Virginia at the time. Carter, only 11-years-old, came to me with a funny look on her face, and I knew something was wrong. I found a tick under her arm. We scrubbed it and washed it, but it was too late.

By February the next year, Carter was very sick, experiencing headaches and flu-like symptoms. Each doctor we brought her to treated the symptoms, but none could identify the underlying cause. As I struggled to find a doctor who would take her case seriously, and find an effective and permanent solution, I had to watch as my daughter went from being a confident and outgoing student, to one that could barely stay awake through her classes. She missed a lot of school, and had to stop her favorite after-school activity - theater - because it simply hurt too much and took too much out of her. Her friends and teachers couldn't understand what she was going through, so she became more and more isolated. Her dog C.C. was the only one who seemed to understand her plight. C.C. was her constant companion, content to sit beside her as she slept or watched movies.

After numerous doctor's visits and misdiagnoses, we finally found a doctor who understood what was happening to Carter: Lyme disease. During the four and a half years it had taken to finally arrive at the correct diagnosis, the infection had really taken hold in Carter. She was losing vision, couldn't stop shaking, experienced tremors, and had difficulty with cognition. She had started on a long journey of repeated infections and roving arthritis that went from one joint to the next.

As a mother, it was devastating to watch. She had to undergo painful spinal taps and surgeries, and she was missing out on some of life's most precious years. She should have been out with her friends enjoying after school activities, and, instead, she was constantly exhausted. My little girl, who showed so much promise, was effectively sidelined from normal life. Although we were finally getting somewhere with her medical care, many of the symptoms persisted. I eventually stopped working so that I could tutor her at home due to her constant pain and exhaustion.

We were consistently trying to manage her treatments while still keeping her on track to graduate from high school. All she wanted was to be a normal kid. She had been accepted to several colleges, and really wanted to attend Columbia College. Her high school experience was so miserable, so her Dad and I really wanted this for her. After all she had been through, dropping Carter off in Chicago, knowing I wouldn't be in the same city if she needed help, was one of the hardest things I have ever done.

Carter still struggled with her illness, but she was thriving at film school. She was asked to work on several films, which was a big deal. She'd work long days to complete a project, and then need a week to recover physically. At the end of her first semester, Canine Therapy Corps brought dogs onto campus to help students de-stress during final exams. Of course Carter, a lifelong animal lover, was there, along with 600 other students. It was overwhelming for her, but being near dogs again was a great experience.

Carter returned to school for the Spring 2015 semester, and her first week back, she became terribly ill again. She missed multiple weeks of school, and one night, I received a terrifying phone call from her saying she couldn't move her head or neck and could barely walk. I flew to Chicago the next day to be with my daughter.

She saw several doctors and they had to run multiple days of tests. These were some of the longest days of my life, and all of the frustrations of not being able to diagnose Carter's Lyme disease flooded back. We found out she would need surgery to have her tonsils removed, and she would have two open wounds at back of throat and a scar on her neck from removing a lymph node. We had to withdraw her from school, and my daughter was angry and upset. She'd just gotten her life back, and now it was being taken away again.

When they scheduled the surgery, I knew we had to do something to keep Carter's spirits up. Knowing how much Carter loved dogs, and how much she missed C.C., I went to the internet to look for local therapy dog groups. I found Canine Therapy Corps, and called them right away. They were very accommodating and sympathetic to what Carter and I had been going through. While they did not usually visit Carter's floor of the hospital, they went out of their way to arrange a special visit with one of the therapy dogs. They made sure to get the appropriate approvals from Carter's doctors and the hospital staff, overcoming several obstacles to make it happen. Their sincerity and compassion was evident, and I could tell that the staff and volunteers really wanted to help my daughter in any way they could. They made sure the visit would be done safely given Carter's illness, but balanced by being professional and working within the hospital's rules with a big heart and a can-do attitude.

When the therapy dog, Rudy, and his handler, Gayle, finally arrived, it was the first smile I'd seen from Carter in a long time. I still get choked up thinking about it. She was thrilled to be near a dog again after so long in hospital rooms. I told Gayle that Carter really needed to get walking again, so she and Rudy took a lap around the hallway. As the two of them walked past the other rooms, everyone wanted to come out and pet Rudy. Even the nurses, with a huge workload and a lot of stress, would smile and drop their shoulders at the sight of Rudy. He not only brought joy and healing to Carter, but to every single person who saw him.

Finally, Carter said she needed to lie back down. Rudy sat beside her and leaned into her as she drifted off to sleep. Gayle said that Rudy doesn't usually do that—he must have known Carter needed some extra support. Rudy and Gayle were kind enough to come back a second time to visit with Carter. By that time, she was starting to feel better and was thrilled to see him. While Rudy was in the room, I didn't see any of the frustration and futility Carter had been feeling over her situation—only happiness.

Carter spent the summer at home, and explored the world of architecture and design in a new internship. She will return to Columbia in the Fall. Her road to recovery is not over, but after some additional treatments, Carter is regaining her confidence and stamina, bit by bit. Many of her symptoms have subsided for the first time in several years. A rescued stray dog, Paulson, found his way into Carter's life as well. She found him wandering the streets of Savannah, and he will be returning to college with Carter in the fall as an extra layer of support.

Our family motto has always been "find the joy"—and we certainly did that with Canine Therapy Corps, despite the terrible ordeal we were going through. I can't thank Gayle and Rudy enough for making two special visits to us at the hospital, and to the other volunteers who brought dogs to Columbia College for Carter and the other students last winter. With six dogs in our family, we wholeheartedly believe in the power of dogs to motivate people and change lives. On behalf of my family and others like mine, thank you for supporting the valuable work of Canine Therapy Corps with your time and donations. We hope they will help many others "find the joy" in the midst of their struggles.

Sincerely,  
Cheri L.Sheridan, M.Ed