

The Healing Process

by Linda Siczkar

T.G.I.F. I thought to myself as I entered the City of Thunder Bay (Ontario) building and headed to my office. Grabbing a cup of coffee I greeted my co-workers and started reviewing the various projects for the day. A newsletter, several changes to department projects, correspondence and a conceptual story board for the annual Christmas program. As a computer graphics illustrator I lived for the high-pressure and high-stress job and the creativity it allowed me to express.

Glancing at my day-timer I knew I'd need to get through several projects to allow me to assist with the United Way Luncheon at noon, rush back to the office and finish up in time for me to meet a friend to go tracking. About 4:30 pm I left the office, dropped by the house to change clothes and load up *True*, (HIT, BIS Can./Am. Champion Chateau Blanc's Elan Illions Am/Can TD, Am/Can TDX, Can. CDX, TT, NA, NGC, AGI, OA, RN, CGC) my Belgian Tervuren and drive across town to a field to meet my friend Marly Desjardin and her Bouvier *Tuscon*. On the drive I thought how excited we were to have both our dogs selected for the upcoming TDX trial. Now it was time to practice, practice, practice.

After laying the tracks we retired to a local diner for dinner and then returned to the field to run our dogs. Of course *True* was outstanding that evening, as good a tracking exhibition as I had ever seen him do up to that point. About 8pm Marly and I said our goodbyes and I loaded *True* into my minivan for the twenty minute trip home. As I pulled onto the highway a light drizzle started to fall and I smiled as I thought how lucky I was to have spent another great night working with my dog.

It was dark, my nose was dripping and I was confused. I'd awakened in a hospital bed. Three weeks had passed since I left the tracking field with *True*. I soon learned that a car leaving the city struck a 2,000 pound plus moose and threw it over the windshield and onto the roof of my minivan where it crumpled the roof onto my head, face and chest. The police and firemen, using the jaws-of-life to cut me from the van, held little hope that I would survive. Sirens blaring and lights flashing I was rushed by ambulance to a local hospital where the decision was made to use a Life Flight helicopter to fly me to St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth, one of the regions top trauma care centers.

My brother Dennis, his wife Susan and my sister Eileen made the ten hour round trip drive to be by my bedside. When I finally awoke and wiped my nose again, I was told I did not have a cold. A normal occurrence in head trauma cases, spinal fluid from the brain trauma caused by the accident was still leaking.

Over a period of days I was told about the moose, the accident and my injuries. *True*, riding snugly in his Kennel-Aire crate was uninjured. The



local Animal Shelter had picked him up from the accident scene and classified him as a Shepherd/Collie cross on their registration form. Quick thinking and with a "don't take no for an answer" attitude my other brother and brother-in-law were standing in the doorway at opening time to retrieve *True* and bring him home. I can't imagine how he would have reacted if he was free in the van – would he have been confused, hurt or protective? Thank goodness we never had to find out.

Holly Siczkar, my niece was one of the people who took my personal items out of the wrecked minivan. She recounted her story for me several months later when she said "*Tears fell down my face as I removed her day-timer, assorted dog stuff and True's tracking harness and lead from the crushed van. Gosh I looked at the bent metal and twisted shape and was amazed that Auntie Linda had survived the collision.*"

Janina Laurin, *True's* breeder has been a pillar of support through my continued recovery. While I was in the hospital, several concerned members of the Terv community contacted her to offer to take *True* in or re-home him. Janina could not contact Sue Bjerklund, the other Thunder Bay Terv owner, for additional information as Sue was off to Minneapolis to pick up a puppy. Janina remembers the date and states, "*Linda and I had just spoken the night before her accident. She was excited about her successes with True so far and we had discussed strategy for the following year when he would be more mature. When I turned on my computer, Monday morning my email exploded with messages one after the other LINDA AND TRUE, LINDA AND TRUE, LINDA AND TRUE.*"

Linda is a fortunate woman. Her support system was nothing short of phenomenal. Her friends managed to find me as they knew she would want me to know. Her life hung in the balance but True had survived." My family, almost all converted dog lovers, and a number of local friends stepped in to see that *True* was well taken care of.

I asked on numerous occasions for my sister to bring *True* to the hospital. As we had been training to become a certified St John's Pet Therapy Dog *True* was used to working in a hospital setting. Eventually my sister gave in and I was placed in a wheelchair and rolled outside to see him. Like many Tervs, *True* is an "*in your face*" kind of dog. With all of the injuries to my head and body, I am told I cringed back, afraid of him or concerned that he might jump up on me and hurt me. He backed away and whined, the poor dog unsure of what to do about my rejection of him.

Weeks later I was allowed to come home for supervised evening visits. Some visits lasted only an hour but over time I was allowed to stay the night. My Pekingese would scurry around and want to be next to me. With all of the injuries my posture, body language and stability had changed so much that *True* had difficulty reading me or understanding what I wanted him to do. With the changed body posture and restricted movements, my commands to him had changed. He was nervous and unsure of what I wanted or what he should be doing to be with or help me.

Moving hospitals again, I was placed in a room on a brain injury floor where my sister was a nurse. *True* and my other dogs came to visit often and spent a lot of time with me while I recovered. My friends and family would bring the dogs to visit on almost a daily basis. I awoke one morning thinking about the "*therapy dog*" training *True* and I had been doing prior to the accident and almost laughed when I thought of him spending so much time with me being the one needing the therapy. When *Ivan*, one of my Pekingese, would come to visit he would lie at the foot of the bed and make me physically work to touch him. When it was time for him to leave he would "*mark*" the corner of my bed, proclaiming that "*I was his property – others stay away!*" It must have been the trauma, for I still adore that little furball.

Over time I progressed to the luxury of supervised weekends at home. It was interesting watching how the dogs would try to reorganize their place in your world. *True* slept on the wood floor in my bedroom. If I got out of bed during the night, he would jump on the bed, and lay on his back. His flews fell open and with his black lip and muzzle his gleaming white fangs would almost appear to float over the bed. With his eyes closed he seemed to be in absolute comfort. The first time or two it was a shock to see those almost haunting teeth and while I was not physically strong enough to move him, eventually he would move himself. Like *Ivan*, *True* just had to show me his position in my life.

With any catastrophic rated brain injury reduced or restricted motor skills and short term memory loss are a few of the many unplanned obstacles you must learn to overcome. My "normal" day-to-day behaviour so radically changed I sometimes questioned if I ever knew how to perform simple functions. I had to re-learn the basic functions we all take for granted. How to brush my hair, wash my face and even standing in front of a closet selecting a shirt or blouse to wear became an ordeal.

People who visited me in the hospital were introduced and then re-introduced to a family member as often as three times in a twenty-minute period. It was sometimes an effort to remember if I had eaten or if a particular person had come by or sent a note. One of my regrets during this period was not remembering when flowers or cards had been delivered or who the wonderful person was who had sent them. I still am reminded of the two dozen yellow roses I received.

I lived with a pad of paper and a pen, to make notes to myself. "*Wear the yellow shirt on the door*" followed by "*Pam will pick me up at 1pm*", and "*take insurance form to Dr Jones*" became commonplace. Sticky notes covered my calendar pleading with me to remember to "*buy groceries*", "*cookies*", "*call Penny at 555-1212*" or other daily activities.

Injuries like mine require time to allow the altered senses to return to what might pass as normal. I was very lucky to not require reconstructive surgery after the accident, but my right eye is set in a slightly different position than it was before the moose. This required me to learn to compensate for the difference. Throughout the recovery period while riding in a car the sights would suddenly become so overwhelming I would have to close my eyes and ride along trying to sort out the array of images. Occasionally I would see a blinding kaleidoscope of patterns and would have to wait until they dissipated to know what I was seeing was actually real.

Several friends "*liberated*" me from the hospital one afternoon and took me to one of the nicer restaurants in town for lunch. Staring at the menu I could not decide what to order. I would decide on one item and then a moment later forget what I had selected. After selecting an entree the waitress returned a few minutes later with the Chicken Caesar salad I'd requested. I placed my face over the salad and inhaled the aroma of the food. Looking at my friends I stated "*F@#\$!!! Does that smell good!*" One of my friends broke out into fits of laughter, while the other two wanted to crawl into a hole from the stares we were receiving from the other people whose lunch had been interrupted by my announcement.

A friend mentioned to my sister that several others wanted to hold some form of a benefit to show they cared. One told another who emailed another and soon a building had to be rented to hold the over 600 friends and family who attended. Many people who could not attend sent cards and notes and donated toys, training supplies and the like for the auction. I was well enough to attend, and with the help of my sister, wrote a little thank you speech, stating that it was like having a living funeral, and spoke of my appreciation for all of them being there. Even I thought it was funny when I arrived to find the benefit was being held at the "*Moose Hall*".

Finally home from the hospital, hopefully for good, I decided it was time to try and take *True* for a walk. It was cold and icy and I was still on quite a bit of medication. I knew I had to be careful and extremely aware of his position and actions. I was concerned with crossing a road or trusting myself to navigate a four inch curb, but off we went



out the front door. We'd only gone a few steps when I stopped. He sat beside me for a moment. He was so excited to be going on a walk and just doing something with me that he launched himself into the air and smashed the top of his head into mine. I was bent over clutching my head in my hands with that big doofus happily licking the back of my hands as if to say "hurry up, you promised me a walk!" It took a few more attempts before we were ready to go on our long walks again.

Early in 1983 I established the K-9 Studio Dog Training Centre. This is a training facility run strictly as a hobby business, which gives me the ability to continue with my passion with dogs. The centre has introduced many dog sports to the area and offers obedience, flyball, agility, show handling and rally classes as well as workshops and seminars on all types of dog sports and interests. During my recovery my amazing instructor friends kept the business up and running.

Prior to the accident *True* was working at the Utility level in obedience. When I was able, a friend would pick us up and take us to class. Quickly I found that almost everything had changed about me. My posture, head position, shoulders, ability to remember commands, quickness to respond and in particular my balance. Classes were an hour long, and I would turn green and get sick often before a quarter of the class was complete. My friends would work *True* for me, and keep at me when I did – "head up" "shoulders back" etc. It certainly taught me how much a dog relies on your body to read what it is you are asking them to do. When I first came back to class, *True* would not sit when I halted, nor follow me easily because my balance was so poor, and I think he feared I'd fall or trip on him which occasionally did happen. I also could not remember how I trained him to do certain things. I could remember how I trained my previous two utility dogs, but he was the freshest in my damaged mind and clicker trained, and apparently those memories were still too new. I soon learned to write my commands on a piece of paper and read them before I entered the competition ring.

True's co-owner, Ed Presnall, an AKC Tracking Judge and the only person to earn 5 VST titles with five different breeds, pushed, prodded and pleaded for me to get back out into urban areas and work with *True*. Listening to his advice and buoyed with his numerous visits to Thunder Bay we worked together and with friends to build up what I thought was *True's* abilities. Along the way I found that Ed was really getting both *True* and I back into shape and I could see my balance and memory improving while I worked on easy *components* to get *True* and I ready for a test. *"I felt if I could get her to work simple component tracks with True her confidence would improve. It was something I could do "long distance" to be a part of her recovery process. True knew she was "different" and slowed his "freight train" pace to fit her slower walk,"* said Ed.

A year later both Ed and I passed our Canadian TDX's on a cold fall morning. Photos show Ed with his Champion Tracker Field Spaniel *Race*, *True* and I holding blue rosettes and shiny passing medals as we smiled for the cameras. As my strength and confidence grew we entered again the next year. Ed passed with his Champion Tracker Irish Water Spaniel *Beacon* and I again with *True*.

The years since the accident have been very challenging for me and for my friends. I can drive again and that by itself makes me feel I have some of my freedom back. I am officially retired and unable to go back to work because of my fatigue and short term memory issues. The job I loved four years ago now frustrates me. Before I thrived on the ability to juggle multiple jobs, learn and become proficient with dozens of software programs, create new designs and plans almost daily and interact with hundreds of others as a part of the "job". Now learning a new program is extremely difficult and I send emails across the globe asking for simple solutions to daily problems. My ability to be attentive is lessened, and my agitation level more sensitive. My bite is not always as bad as my bark. My friends understand but this is



something I always joke to our K-9 students about.

Since my accident I've tried to jump back into dog sports. I've been successful with my Pekes, by earning three Champions in the show ring and titling in Obedience and in Rally. My love affair with *True* continues as we persist in working together. Since the accident we have earned dozens of Group placements and a second Best In Show as well as earning his CD and CDX, UD, Am CD, OA, AGI, RE, Am RN, Can RA, MCL, CGC and American and Canadian TDX titles. With limited showing *True* was the #2 Belgian Shepherd in Canada in 2005.

Carol Ruthenberg, a fellow Terv owner and AKC Tracking Judge was one of the judges at our passing TDX near Minneapolis, MN. She commented " *You should be so very proud of your boy and your own expertise in training and handling! You did a wonderful job on a challenging track... one of the best runs that I have ever seen. After hearing of your accident and recovery it is even more remarkable!!!*"

As I continue to work with *True* in obedience, agility, rally and his love of tracking I constantly remind myself of the "goal" we set. Working in small steps and following a plan, accompanied by tons of post-it-notes, we move forward towards *True* becoming the first BIS, HIT and Champion Tracker Terv in Canada.

I believe my friends and family kept me strong, but without the care and comfort of my dogs I would have been lost. Janina concurs with her statement " *Many will credit the doctors, her family and friends for her remarkable and continued road to recovery. They deserve many accolades but it was True which gave her a will to define a goal and continue to live. I sent Linda notes along the way, that her recovery was the most important thing and all the plans for True obtaining this award or that award did not matter. It did not matter at all. As Linda's early recovery began we spoke or emailed frequently. Our conversations were light and many times repetitive (due to the injury) but always she spoke of what True did that day to help her heal...he stood by her side, he guided her out the door, he barked when she had an episode, he made her laugh, he adapted to her wobbly gait, he found her keys when she lost them. You can measure a dog by its wins in the ring, by its record as a producer but when you have a dog which gives his owner back her life and they work together at it, it is immeasurable. The two of them are an inspiration to the spirit of the human/animal bond. I celebrate with them in everything they do.*"

Last year I purchased a motor home and traveled to Moose, WY where I bought a small gold moose necklace that I wear daily. This year I drove to Calgary, Alberta and watched as *True* received an Award of Merit at the Belgian Shepherd Dog National Specialty and then won BOB the next two days. On each occasion my niece Holly, now older and somewhat use to my forgetfulness, wished me a safe trip and stayed at my house to care for my dogs (pekes).

"*Linda and True define teamwork. They are one of the hardest working teams I have had the pleasure to work with. Their star is still rising and I look forward to helping them meet their goals,*" commented Ed after watching Linda and *True* work together.

The accident and recovery process has made me a stronger person. I now appreciate the little things I do each day, and every wet Pekingese sneeze or Tervuren slurp on my cheek. I've been kept here on this earth for a reason. Thank DOG!

