

FOR THE LOVE OF A MINI AUSSIE

By: Colleen Storms

When I married Mike I had a yellow Labrador Retriever named Duffy. Duffy, who we had for 15 years, had puppies and that brought us Mac who stayed with us all his 14 years. Sometime in the transition of putting our lives together and making plans, we talked about dogs. My husband loved Australian Shepherds and had owned two. My interest was piqued. Then we found out that they came in a smaller version too and started looking. We didn't know at the time that when you head out to find a show quality blue merle female Mini Aussie, you might as well be looking for a unicorn.

After several breeders made noises like maybe they'd have a puppy for us, but never got back to us, we called the right breeder at the right time and she said yes. She'd just had a litter and one of the blue merle girls would be available. When you find your unicorn, you will go to get it regardless the cost, so we didn't even ask how much. We drove to central California at the appointed 8 weeks and picked up the pup we'd been staring at pictures of for two months. When we heard the price, we just swallowed hard, but we were in for the ride and we were in love.

When you pick up a pup in central California and have to drive it back to Washington with you, it's good to know if they've ridden in a car before and if that was in a crate or not. And probably you should bring a crate for that pick-up. Thus started the training of the human parents. We had a sick vomiting pooping puppy through three states. All we felt was guilt after awhile as we'd put her through this. It still never occurred to us to stop and buy a crate or something to help, so it was changes of clothing and cleaning with water and napkins that got us home.

By the time we got to our home in Kelso, the poor puppy looked like she'd been wrung out and hanged on a line. She had nothing left to throw up and just wanted to rest. I said to my husband, "I know we don't want a dog sleeping on the bed, but I think after what she's been through, this first night I'd like to have her that close." He agreed and we all 3 got much needed sleep. She obliged by going to the foot of the bed and stretching out with our feet. When we got up in the morning and she was still sleeping we left her there for a few minutes and when we came back she was laying on her back on the pillow having a good ol' back rub. She even posed there for her first victory picture! Almost 16 years later she still sleeps on the bed or by it depending on her preference. It wouldn't work any other way.

When she was a young grown dog we'd play a game on the bed where she'd lay on her back all submissive and I could pick her up and toss her to a different spot on the bed still on her back. She loved that game! Our morning wake-ups were always a party. She always has loved to wake up and roll on the floor on her back getting her morning "scritches" I call them. Then she'd take the occasional pass at the bed to get the sides scratched too, quite the self-service girl this one! When she was about 10 or so and the body had occasional aches and pains, I started trying different types of massage on the bed that seemed to help. Her favorite was me putting my hands under her when she was lying on her back and moving my hands around while the weight of her body provided the pressure. She taught me these things- I didn't google. And I'd do it all again and more often if we could go back there.

Being a dog we planned to breed we experienced “heat cycles” with Gennie. The first time we were amazed at the misery displayed. Mike said she had the “vapors” and should put her paw across her forehead and swoon. It was such drama! But we did find that breeding her wasn’t difficult- she was a bit of a femme fatale. I’ll spare the details. But, one of the things that was so part of her story was meeting Christina Baker who owned a very fancy champion stud dog named Teddy. Teddy was popular and had a litter or two under his belt, but Gennie fell hard for him and I don’t think she ever loved another like that. When we’d see him at shows and other activities my 30 pound dog could drag me over to see him like a girl batting her eyes at her beau. I’m glad she never knew it wasn’t exclusive. I know I’m anthropomorphizing a bit, but if there was a dog that could make you think of Scarlet O’Hara, it was Gennie. And she and Teddy did have two litters of pups, and some of those pups are the foundation of all the dogs that we own and have bred to date. They have been pretty special and it’s very unusual in the dog world to have your first one of a breed be the one that your whole program is based upon. We were so blessed to have Gennie be all things to our MCStorms program and also be irreplaceable in our lives.

The greatest service that Gennie has given me has been her constant company and love through the different journeys of my life these past 16 years. She has been with us for 16 of our 20 years of marriage to date. She has been present part of the time in three of the offices I’ve worked at in 12 years of government work. Some of the most fun times were at the Town of Twisp where she got to meet all the staff there. She especially loved macho policemen. There is a coquette in her that loves nothing better than a guy telling her how pretty she is. I would just shake my head as they’d coo to her. It was like having the cute blonde skinny girlfriend and standing alongside her while she entertained the troops! But, Gennie could have her fun because at night she was sleeping by MY feet!

There are so many stories to tell about Gennie’s antics. Was she a perfect dog? Oh no! We learned as we went, but we let her get by with a lot of things we don’t tolerate today. She soon did sleep in a crate if we traveled; that led to her going everywhere with us! But, when we were building our home in Twisp there wasn’t a contractor on site that hadn’t been greeted by her as she made a fast run across the yard and jumped at them in the last couple of feet making sure to hit them with her front paws as if to say, “Hey! Glad to see you again!!” And being a dog of her height, and given the contractors were all men, you can imagine what that hit in the crotch with momentum meant to them! I tried to keep that from happening, but I have to say my record wasn’t really good back in the day.

I think one of the most eye-opening experiences we’ve had with Gennie is when she met cattle. We live in an area that’s “free-range”. What that means is if you don’t want cattle on your property you have to fence them out. You cannot harm a bovine that visits you and being by the river, in the late summer they would visit us. She was probably only 2 years old when we came out the front door of the house and saw a couple of cows and calves lounging under a barn roof we had with no walls. She took off like a rocket and ran right for them and the cow, knowing the game a lot better than Gennie, kicked once and the sound of it on Gennie’s skull sounded across the yard. I knew she’d be killed. She turned and ran back to the front door and I figured it was the body’s reflex because it didn’t know it had been hit with a fatal blow. And I caught up and examined her head. There was a scrape on the skull, not very bad, no indentation, and her eyes weren’t hurt or dilated oddly. I was pretty careful with her that night, but it appeared she’d survived the best that cow could give. I thought to myself, ‘well, she won’t try that again...’

It was a few months later when I opened the front door again and there were three younger steers just beyond the barn under some trees. Off she tore again before I could catch her! This time she stayed far enough away from the steers and ran in a circle around them. She eventually moved them off toward the river and away from the house! Hmm, I thought, she's a lot faster learner than I would have been. After that, I put her on a long line a couple of times to help push the cattle across our metal bridge to the road side of the river. They would come in here for water and the cattle owner wanted to pick them up, but they needed to be on the other side of the river for the catching and loading to easily work. Cattle don't like walking on metal things, especially across strange water, but with my little herding dog on a lead and me waving and hollering the cows would finally lead the group across the bridge. That is just a glimpse for me of how these dogs were genetically designed to aid mankind, but it has been so special to get to see that. I owe that to Gennie.

Gennie has been a healthy dog, no diseases or serious stuff through about 14 years of age. When she was 11 she did give us a terrible night though. We decided to go see a movie one night, an infrequent luxury for us. She had earned the status of staying in the bedroom when we were gone; the younger ones had their nighttime crates to keep them safe and the house safe. I didn't realize that Mike had been given a one-pound box of Sees Chocolates from a customer. He didn't realize that an 11 year old dog could smell them through an unopened box and jump from a bed to the top of a dresser a few feet away and open said box. We came home from the movie about 10 to find a very hyper dog in a bedroom with the little paper cups left from candy boxes strewn around the bed and the room, box on the floor. Empty box. In a quick panic looking for the rest of the chocolates we did find about three whole ones that she'd stashed under dad's pillow. I guess for later.

So, we had one of those urgent calls to the veterinary office and received instructions for making the dog vomit what would come up. We saw quite a bit of chocolate out in the yard via flashlight. And then had to administer liquid activated charcoal to a pukey 11 year old dog who looked like the victim at that point. I know she felt like the victim and that we'd lost our minds. It still was quite a quantity of chocolate, and the dark chocolate type which is the worst. So, we were pretty scared for the next couple of days, but she progressed like the chocolate champ of the canine world. I know if she was writing this account it would read much differently!

When Gennie was 14 years old and starting to slow down a bit, no new crazy stories of doggy misbehavior coming to light, we had a large wildfire just 5 miles away from us during the summer. We lived in an orange haze of smoke watching for the evacuation notice to leave. We had puppies just a few weeks old and 7 dogs and had readied our trailer for evacuation if we needed to do it, but we were able to stay in place and a huge organized effort by firefighting agencies kept the fire at a safe distance until the fall. We had air purification in the house and stayed inside as much as possible, but the smoke overcame Gennie's lungs and she developed a severe bronchial asthma. That has definitely changed her days and we've dealt with the consequences as they've come. She's needed meds, special diets, paw-holding, and we have oxygen available if the day comes when she has to battle for breath. We know we are living her last days with us.

And still this dog is teaching me things about how I want to live my life. She is blessed to have no signs of doggy dementia or loss of who she is. She can't hear anything- nerve deafness hits quickly. But, she responds to a few hand signals that help us to manage and she's developed her own techniques of coping with the hearing loss. Since she can't hear me drop food in the kitchen any more, she's changed

her routine to walking back and forth between my legs and the kitchen counter patrolling for dropped treasures. It's highly effective, but drives me crazy because if I wheel around too fast I'm usually tripping over her. And I realize that she's trained me to stand a little farther back from the counter so she can do her job better, making me work a little harder at my chores! So, one thing I have learned lately is it doesn't take words sometimes to change someone's position. Just stay close and repetitively rub them the wrong way!

As more complications in her health have come, and I am 65 years old, I feel that I'm seeing one way of how our last years can go as people. She doesn't give up. She accepts the changes that limit her now and still does the things that are most important to her. She ignores the din and quickly moving dog children around her quite well; occasionally she has to AARF at one who disrespects her too much. She gives valued affirmation to us, her people, now more with looks than licks, but she can say it all with her eyes. She still resists a bath or a nail trim to let us know she is a dog of principles! But, she never wants to be left behind and will totter on unsteady back legs to follow me anywhere.

The changes we see feel like a slow fading of her crispness she lived her life with. She's quieter, more still and resting, usually slower to move (unless she's trying to get in front of you to make sure you don't leave her), and relies on the other dogs to tell her if there's something outside worth walking to the door. She's present, but lighter on the landscape of our dog lives. She's a lot of my purpose these days, the one that makes me want to be near, and the trail blazer that I know I'll follow around the bend one day. She's "my dog", my perpetual sidekick, my shotgun rider, and the reason I feel my way with my toes to the bathroom at night. I have to confess I'm not sure if my car can make a trip without her in the seat. But, she's quietly showing me that she is not going to be the center of my focus forever. I really hope in my last years, like we all hope, that we aren't a burden on people we love, that we know who we are and who they are till the end, and then we just go away naturally one day. God has shown me, through Gennie, that there is a time to die and that it's part of life still. I don't have to fear all the changes, although I really hope for the natural slow fading like I've seen with her. And that it can be an honor for a person to help another through the last part of life in a life-filled way. I hope for that too.

But my primary reason for writing this is to give honor and tribute to a spunky little dog that has changed our lives dramatically in the last 16 years. And to give that tribute while she's lying at my feet and giving me "the look" when I try to walk away. She's changed our lives, both Mike and I. We have literally hundreds of people we've met through dog showing, breeding, and placing puppies, and those people have changed our lives, made life much richer. Raising dogs is a lot of problem-solving, learning, and physical effort. Selling dogs is a lot of communication, relationship building, and dedication to follow-through. It is an honor to be a person who can help with the creation of pet dogs that change other peoples' lives. Gennie is at the center of that opportunity we've had. Gennie was our opportunity to carry off a beautiful little blue pup that we had no idea what to do with! And no idea of how big her reach would be. Gennie, I want only the best for you and I want every day that God wants you to have with us. I will be here for them all. And, when the time comes for you to go, I will rest on these words that were spoken by Billy Graham:

"I think God will have prepared everything for our perfect happiness. If it takes my dog being there (in heaven), I believe he'll be there."

Colleen Storms