

## MANDY

— Karen Mangini, *Fitting model/design consultant* —

Several years ago, I went to an animal shelter looking for a cat, but I was heart-struck by a mangy little brown dog. There was a large, red check mark on her cage; meaning she would be put down later that day. She had been returned to the shelter

three times for being feisty and not good with children (“nippy” was the word they used) and was considered unadoptable.

I had no idea what I was doing. I had never had a dog before, but I felt compelled to rescue her. On the way home this skinny



little mess tried to bite me. I snapped back at her and instinctively grabbed the back of her neck. She settled right down. Maybe she remembered her mother enforcing a lesson in manners.

Mandy turned out to be a purebred cocker spaniel. She does whatever I ask: She sneezes on command, dances, and even prays. My secret? I hold an image in my mind of what I want her to do and project this image to her. After much time, love, and a great deal of patience, Mandy received her therapy dog certification. She is now a wonderful little love dog who opens every-one's heart and helps people heal.

At first we were affiliated with an organization that supervised pet visits at a large children's hospital. Mandy got fired from this organization for praying—yes, praying. (It's just an endearing trick: She sits, places her paws against my arm or a pillow, then puts her nose down on her paws to "say her prayers.") Apparently there had been a person working with this organization who had her dog "pray" for patients, then proceeded to try to convert them. The organization was forced to make a rule—no praying! Well, we complied for a while but then I began to feel it was silly. Many patients wanted Mandy to pray for them. After all, she has no agenda, and I don't either, so she prayed, and after the third reprimand, they let us go.

We certified with another organization and now Mandy prays whenever anyone asks her to. We visit hospitals and the Lull Special Education Center. Several times we visited a man who was in a coma, and when he regained consciousness the only thing he remembered was Mandy's name. At Lull we visited with a child who had been almost totally unresponsive for months. I didn't

realize this and was not surprised when the child showed interest, even delight, in Mandy and her antics, but the teachers were amazed at the change in this child.

Mandy loves coming to Lull, a school that serves students ages three to twenty-two with a variety of disabilities including autism, hearing and visual impairment, and significant developmental delays. Sometimes, wearing her pink tutu, she likes to dance and do tricks for the children. Occasionally some of them may be a little afraid of dogs but they get over it quickly. The teachers say that it is especially important for these children to learn to be comfortable with dogs because some of them may need a guide or service dog in the future. Mandy usually knows what the kids need; she likes to interact with them but always stays a safe distance from the ones who want to grab her soft furry ears.

Mandy and I are kindred spirits. I was almost made a ward of the court when I was fifteen, but with a chip on my shoulder after abuse by multiple family members, I ran away from home instead. No one admitted to the abuse until years later. No one took the time to understand me. Mandy had been repeatedly rejected and returned to the shelter. No one had taken the time to understand her, either.

I hope my story can inspire other victims of abuse to realize that they are not alone, that they can let go of the past, move on, and heal. I never knew what love was until I met Mandy, who truly opened my heart. She was the first being I felt safe to love. Mandy was brought to me so that I could know what it means to have an open heart; so that I could know what it means to love. We both needed love, guidance, and purpose. We found it in each other.