

Liz & Boo

By Greg Kincaid

In May of 1979, having a semester to spare before I started law school, I served as Johnson County's first diversion coordinator. I worked in the DA's office and spent my coffee breaks wandering around the courthouse in awe, reverently watching lawyers and judges do their jobs. There was a cafeteria in the basement where the legal professionals—back then, mostly men—congregated, laughed, and gossiped. I remember, too, being shocked that the jail was in the same courthouse as the judge's and the prosecutor's offices. Though only 22 years-old, I knew that was a bad idea. I've spent forty years now wandering around that same courthouse. During those decades, I have not given enough thought to what it's like for the non-lawyers: the people that sit nervously on those church-like pews lining the corridors. When I look closely at those faces, I see that they are sad. They are frightened. They are anxious. For most of them, something valuable is at risk—their children, their freedom, or their financial resources. I've come to realize that the courthouse is not a happy place for most people. This is a story, at least in part, about those unhappy people and one woman's efforts to ease their suffering.



No one can know for sure, but our best guess is that about 30,000 years ago wolves figured something out. If they could learn how to be useful to humans, there was a lot of easy food to be had. Out of that relationship, dogs evolved. So too did the relationship between dogs and mankind. It's easy to assume that we taught dogs all they know. Frankly, I've always wondered if the opposite wasn't just as true. Courage, selflessness, and concern for the family unit—maybe, like Mowgli in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, it's humanity that has learned a lot from our canine pals.

One thing has always been a common denominator in our relationship with dogs. Dogs aim to please. They have an amazing capacity to sense our needs and deliver.

For most of the relationship between man and dogs, our society has been agrarian. Not surprisingly, therefore, dogs were useful by doing the work that we did not or could not do ourselves. Dogs were herders, retrievers, pointers, hunters, and trackers.

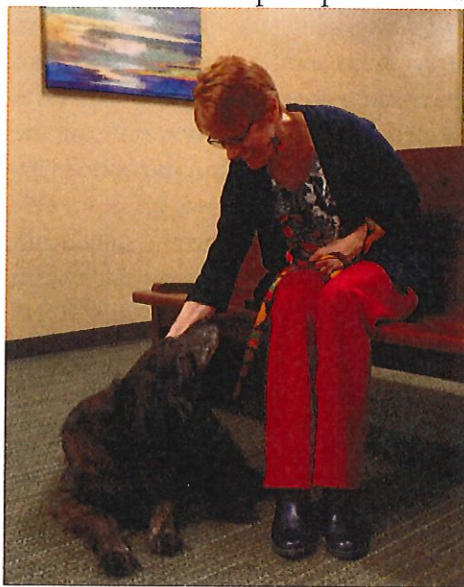
As we moved from agriculture to more of an urban society, we saw a shift in the ways that dogs found to be useful. Dogs became guard dogs, war dogs, seeing-eye dogs, and drug sniffing dogs, but most commonly just great companions in an isolating world. Still, it seems, dogs find ways to be helpful; it's a survival strategy that works.

After I graduated from law school in 1982, I started a job at a law firm in down-

town KCMO. About the same time, there was a young woman doing something new herself. She was one of a few women at the large law firms that were breaking ground with a concept that had not been around for long. Some people thought it was a bad idea; other readily saw the merit. Liz had red hair, an infectious smile and boundless energy. Liz Graham was already doing then what she would continue to do for many years to come. She was on the cutting edge. Liz wasn't a lawyer, but she wasn't a secretary either. She was called a paralegal. Many questioned the wisdom of having non-lawyers doing legal work. It just didn't seem right. Still, Liz was an excellent one. The firm was quickly sold on this paralegal idea. A few years later, I moved to another firm. Years passed without me seeing much of Liz. Then one day she walked into the principal's office at

animals therapy dogs.

For the last twenty years, our family law judges have been giving Liz Graham and her therapy dogs the tough cases -- families in a destructive spiral. Liz has made a career out of helping families that have wandered far afield from the boundaries of healthy relationships and good parenting. Liz tries and often succeeds in



the small Catholic school where my two youngest children attended. There was a dog with her. It was 1997. I quizzed Liz, "Why are you here?"

Liz's career had continued to morph, but stayed always on the cutting edge. She had moved into counseling and therapy work, was working with the court system, doing mediation and was also a part-time school counselor. She was doing something that no else did. It seemed that children feel comfort and safety around dogs. So, why not bring them along with her to school? She called these highly trained and docile

directing these families back to a healthier path, back where they need to be. As far as anyone knows, Liz is the only therapist in town that is using therapy dogs to work with children, and often the parents, too. She's good at it. It turns out that for these tough cases, even a good therapist needs a good partner.

Liz is quiet and has little interest in tooting her own horn. You must pry a bit to discover the many contributions she had made and continues to make to our community. So, I ask questions. Liz and her therapy dogs not only provide private counseling, but she also volunteers with the Veteran's Court. Liz and her therapy dog, Boo, also work with children placed in TLC. These children are the really hard cases—they have been taken out of their homes. They are afraid and they are often angry. Liz tells me about the little girl she visits that uses a word with Boo that has long since fallen from the little girl's vocabulary. Boo has helped her to rediscover this lost word. When Liz visits her, the little girl hugs the grey dog and whispers in her ear, "Boo, I love you!"

It's a Thursday afternoon on the fourth floor of the Courthouse. It's the toughest floor. Judges Foth and Sloan have a

CINC docket. Children in Need of Care. It's heart wrenching. It's not fun. Parents sit on the wooden benches, visibly trembling. In an hour from now, will someone take their child away from them? Children are confused and scared. Lawyers sit sullenly waiting for their cases to be called. The stakes couldn't be higher. It's a balancing act between a parent's right to be a parent and a child's right to live free from abuse or neglect. It's a tight rope and no one is there to lend a kind hand or a word of comfort. Still, today, they're not entirely alone. Boo, eleven years old, a mixed breed lab, with long silky greying hair, approaches with her handler, now a slightly greying red haired woman. Boo's tail wags. She cautiously approaches and rests her chin, instinctively, on a man's knee. She knows what he needs. Dogs have always known what we humans need.

About a year and half ago, Judge Foth and Liz were sitting together at an AFCC conference in Seattle. It was one of those break-out lectures. This one was all about using animals in tough reintegration cases (mostly horses). But Liz also knew that dogs across the country were moving into the legal world. They're called "Court-house Dogs." With encouragement from Judge Foth, Liz and her therapy dogs started hanging out at the CINC docket just to "see how things might go."

Ask Judge Foth, he will tell you. Things

went well.


Liz and Boo put their toes into a whole new game. Liz is leading the local charge to get dogs involved in these tough cases. Who else? As in the past, she's alone for now: the sole volunteer. Sometimes, not with a huge amount of support. Not yet. It's always tough being an innovator. The resistance to Boo is ironic. Even though she is the gentlest creature in the building, perhaps the cleanest, and the most carefully trained on the rules of civility, there are doubters. They ask, what if she bites? They ask, apparently forgetting that just seconds before they passed through a metal detector designed to ferret out the weapons that humans use to destroy each other. What if she makes a mess on the carpet?" they ask, when all around them are the human messes left to judges and lawyers to clean-up. Boo doesn't make dog messes; she cleans-up human messes.

I watch Liz and Boo move up and down the corridor greeting those that want to be greeted. An older male lawyer sits on the bench. He acts bored and shows no interest in the dog. Boo senses his disinterest and moves down the corridor of benches with Liz. The next person, a middle-aged woman, clearly distraught, leans forward and begins to excitedly talk to the grey, tail-wagging dog. Boo knows that this female likes dogs, so she moves closer and the woman buries her face in Boo's soft fur and she seems palpably relieved. For just a moment, she feels safe, cared for. Liz moves further down the bench. People seem surprised. Why a dog in the courthouse? they either ask or want to ask. Liz says the same thing to them, time after time. She sums it all up. The courthouse isn't a happy place. Liz bends down and pats Boo. She smiles, allows the dog to gently approach, and says in a matter of fact way, like it should be obvious to all of us, "Boo's job is to make you smile."

After Boo does her work that afternoon, making people smile, Liz and I wander down to Judge

Sloan's chambers. I wonder what the bench--or at least one judge--thinks about Boo and Liz's work together. Judge Sloan has just returned from being out of the office. She's in jeans and casually dressed. It works out well for greeting this furry, unpaid, courthouse volunteer. Judge Sloan is instantly on the ground and Boo seems very pleased to greet her. Judge Sloan later tells me what is apparent from the exchange of affection I just witnessed. "Courthouse dogs aren't just for the public. They're for everyone, including courthouse personnel. They break the tension. They reduce our stress levels."

I needed no proof for her conclusion; I had been witnessing it first-hand that afternoon. Still, I wondered, so I asked, "What is it about dogs that engenders such a calming effect?" Liz and Judge Sloan concurred in their explanation. Dog are non-judgmental. They immediately accept us and could care less about our age, gender, race, appearance, balance sheet or rap sheet. Suddenly, it made a lot of sense. In a building where lots of "judging" goes on, Boo embraces. In a building where a lot of rejection happens, Boo tail wags. In a building where the world seems to have many sharp edges, Boo is soft.

Now that I have witnessed what Liz and her dogs can do, I would invite you to do the same. Stop by the fourth floor on Thursday afternoons, usually sometime after 2:00, sit down, breathe deeply, and meet Boo--a furry smile giver. Thank Boo and Liz for their hard work. 



About the Author



Greg Kincaid is a JOCO Bar member and he is also the New York Times best-selling author of six novels, all published by Penguin Random House. Two of his novels were made into Hallmark movies. His latest work, *Noelle*, was just released.

In this novel, Greg borrows from his law practice as a divorce mediator to tell the story of a Kansas family torn by divorce and healed by a dog. Please visit www.gregkincaid.com for more information.