

Off the Beaten Patch: 'Dogs Are Not Our Whole Life, But They Make Our Lives Whole'

How the love of one dog helped a woman die in peace.

By DONNA LYNN RHODES (Open Post)

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It has been said that dogs will remain faithful and true to the last beat of their hearts; I believe that a dog remains faithful and true to the last beat of *your* heart.

Here's why.

Roxie came in to my life nine years ago and filled my life with love. She's sweet and funny and teaches me about trust, compassion and loyalty on a daily basis. Roxie has brought tremendous happiness and laughter not to only my family, but to so many she's sniffed along the way.

When Roxie was a puppy, I took her to as many public places as possible so she would get used to being with lots of people in different environments. Even though Roxie totally flunked obedience school, she somehow mastered the art of good manners and canine courtesy.

One Saturday morning Roxie and I visited my boss's grandmother who was living in a group home in Walnut Creek. Rosetta was in a wheelchair and, when I put Roxie on her lap, they both grinned from ear to ear. Roxie weighed a mere five pounds but wasn't afraid of the big wheels or any sudden movements; and I was surprised how my playful little pup turned into a calm little angel with Rosetta.

A friend of my family was in a rehab center recuperating from heart surgery and I got permission to bring Roxie with us to visit her. Roxie and I went from room to room and I asked the patients if they would like to pet her. I held Roxie and walked over to their wheelchair or bed and they smoothed her chubby little paw or petted the top of her head. Bed after bed, smile after smile, it was such a rewarding experience. In one room, a woman sat up and started a conversation with Roxie (calling her "her little Shatzie") and I just let her go on and on. She suddenly stopped, and lay back down. The woman in Bed Two whispered that that was the first time her roommate had spoken a word in weeks.

The next day we went back and my family and I were sitting in the lobby and I let Roxie off leash and let her walk around. Suddenly we see a metal walker moving down the hall without a person attached to it. My mom, dad and I jumped up to see what was going on and there's Roxie lying on the floor, her mouth attached to the green tennis ball on the leg of the walker and dragging it down the hall.

Laughter truly is the best medicine.

Which brings us back to Walnut Creek and a dog being faithful to the last beat of your heart.

Virginia was born in 1922 and grew up in Spain. She moved to America, met and married a Cuban musician, and soon after became pregnant with her daughter Iris. When her husband wanted to take his wife and child back to Cuba, Virginia said no and chose to raise her daughter Iris in New York – on her own.

Confident and beautiful – what they called ‘a looker’ in those days – Virginia knew she could raise Iris on her own. She had several ‘glamour’ jobs including an elevator girl and a model for Warner’s Brassieres. Later, she and Iris moved to Miami where Virginia headed a department for Bobby Brooks Clothing, and later landed her dream job with Pan Am Airlines. Iris was now a married woman living in California. When Pan Am went bust, Virginia decided she would return to her native Spain and live the rest of her life there. On ‘one last road trip’ across country to visit her daughter, Virginia climbed up the stairs to board an RV and lost her footing. She fell backwards and woke up a quadriplegic.

A devout Catholic, Virginia prayed to St. Jude every day for all the suffering people in the world. Not her, mind you. She knew it was God’s will that left her paralyzed and she never felt sorry for herself.

Iris hired and fired seven caretakers in as many months because they didn’t give her mom the love and respect she deserved. All that changed when an adorable Guatemalan woman named Aracely (RC for short) answered an ad in the paper. They lived together for 18 years and RC became more of a daughter than a caretaker to Virginia.

Which brings us back to Roxie and the love that changed a life.

I loved to travel and needed someone to watch Roxie who would let her sleep in her bed, give her tons of attention and, most of all, love her as much as I did. It was the grace of God that led us to Virginia and RC.

Virginia’s daughter Iris wanted to be there when Roxie and I met Virginia – not only so she could see how Roxie would react to a woman in a wheelchair but to make sure that her being there wasn’t going to add to RC’s already full plate. It was love at first sight. Roxie nestled in Virginia’s lap and looked at me *like don’t let the door hit you on the way out.*

Virginia and RC dog-sat Roxie every chance they got. Whether it was for a night, a week or a month, they couldn't wait – nor could Roxie. One day when I picked her up, Virginia said to Roxie, "*Roxita, enseñale tu pelotita nueva a tu mami.*" Roxie left the room and comes back with a new toy they bought her and it suddenly dawned on me that Roxie was bilingual.

But it was the sweet nothings that Virginia would whisper in Roxie's ear that clinched the bond. RC told me how she would recline Virginia's wheelchair and lay Roxie on Virginia's chest. Virginia would give her kisses and sing softly to her "*Como quiero a mi Roxita la mas bonita.*" (I love Roxie and she is the prettiest.) Even though Virginia couldn't use her arms, she somehow managed to hold Roxie close to her heart.

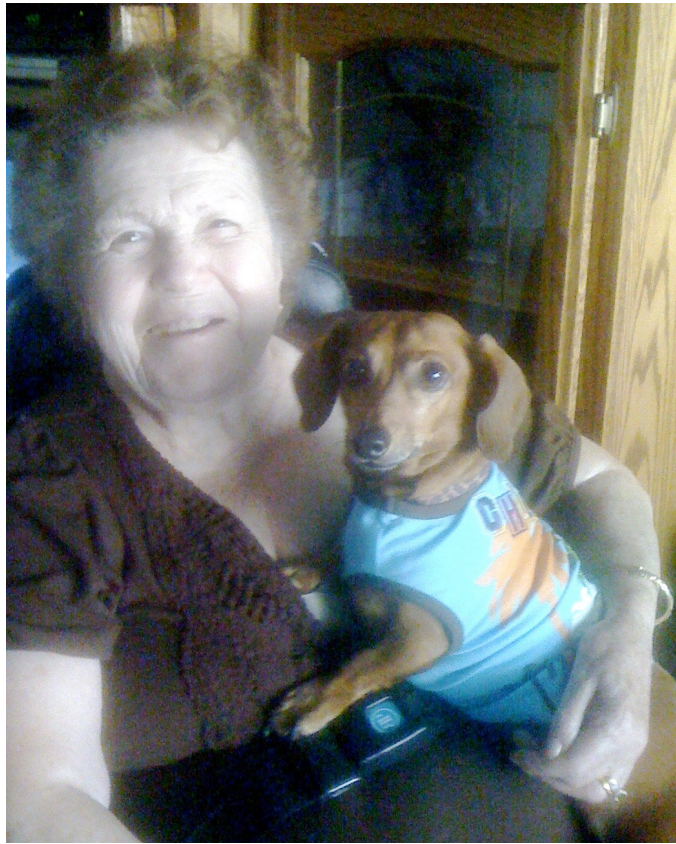
Iris and RC said they have never seen anything like the bond Virginia and Roxie had – not even with Iris's own dogs. They said that Roxie always had one eye on Virginia and wouldn't sleep until she did. If Virginia made the slightest move Roxie, a delicate, nine-pound wiener dog was right there acting like a caretaker and Wonder Dog all rolled into one. When Virginia moved her wheelchair to the other side of the room Roxie would take her teeth and drag her dog bed to the other side of the room and push it up against the front wheel. Day or night, Roxie went everywhere Virginia went – even to church. Yes, church. RC would put Roxie in her little carrier and placed it on the bottom back rack of Virginia's wheelchair and off they'd go. Now my English-speaking Jewish dog was praying in Spanish at St. Mary's Catholic Church.

On walks back from Heather Farm -- Roxie exhausted from playing -- she'd hop up on the back of the wheelchair and get a 'lift' from Virginia. She soon figured out in their house that she could wiggle her way up onto Virginia's crippled legs like a sea lion at Pier 39. It was hilarious to watch and even more so, when Virginia would say, "*Roxita, ponte las pilas que vamos a pasear.*" Which roughly translates to, "Put your batteries in, we're going for a ride!" Sure enough, Roxie would wiggle up onto her feet and she and Virginia would ride around the house in her motorized wheelchair.

No wonder Virginia cried when I came to get Roxie.

Virginia was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer this summer and given months if not weeks to live. I asked if I should bring Roxie there to stay and everyone agreed that it would be the best medicine. Roxie, who is always a very good girl and rarely has an accident, peed and pooped in the house a few times the next day. They said Roxie was extremely anxious and was whining and crying.

That night Virginia collapsed and the paramedics were called. Roxie was inconsolable as they were trying to revive Virginia and in the end, Roxie was licking Virginia's face and as Virginia took her last breath, Roxie rolled up in a ball, curled into Virginia's neck and closed her eyes.



The top headline is a quote from the late Roger A. Caras, an American wildlife photographer who hosted the television broadcast of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in New York.