

On the Positive Side: Taffy's gone, but her memory lives on

By Judy Kirschner For the Sun-News

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It was July 3, 2009, and Austen had turned 7 the day before. His dog Taffy was 18½, a very good age for a very good old dog. As she failed more and more, the family knew it was time to put her to sleep. Our greatest gift to her would be a peaceful death at home, surrounded by family.

My job, as his grandmother, was to guide Austen through this passage. As a child, I was excluded from the ceremony that marked the loss of my grandmother. I remember only being told, "Your grandmother has passed, tell your grandfather you're sorry." I was mystified: What had I done to apologize for?

Later I realized that this way of handling death did nothing to keep my memories alive. By shutting the door on death, you let the child's imagination take over. Then death can be something awful that stays with him his whole life.

I wanted Austen to have a different experience. Instead of shutting him out, I hoped I could involve him in this experience in a way that would help him to keep his positive memories all his life. The proper preparation for Taffy's death would give him coping skills for what life would bring.

I didn't want to see fear in Austen's eyes as the time approached.

Taffy was a special dog. I trained her as a therapy dog after I had my stroke, and she was allowed to visit me in the hospital. The staff saw a difference in me after she had visited, and asked if she would like to visit other new stroke patients. Taffy did so with pride.

Taffy was an Australian shepherd, and like her breed, was accustomed to think before she acted. She had a way of understanding what people needed from her. When my mom was in the nursing home with cancer, Taffy would place herself on the floor, then at the bottom of the bed, or within arm's reach, depending on what Mom needed.

The deep connection between the boy and the dog was reflected in every exchange on her last day. The boy and his dog were to be parted, but they would always be joined. We all knew that Taffy was a part of all of us. The memories would be good ones.

His grandfather dealt with his loss that day by building a beautiful coffin for Taffy's last resting place. He dug a deep hole for the coffin. Austen was able to observe his grandfather deal with his grief.

Austen felt the sadness in the house that day. He started to explain, "Remember yesterday? When Taffy had to go potty, we had to help her. We have to let her go now." When Austen was sick as a child his mother would cover him, making sure he was warm and comfortable. This day Austen got a pillow for Taffy's head and a blanket to cover her. Fearing she was thirsty and knowing she could not get up by herself, he brought her a popsicle too. "Touch her, talk to her, let her smell you," we said, as Taffy lay on the rug.

Austen's mother got the day off from work. Taffy's pet-sitter arrived, and we sat and shared stories, tears flowing. The vet would come to the house at 4 p.m. and help Taffy go over the rainbow.

"Is that the same as being with God?"

"Yes, death can be a comfortable friend."

We asked Austen if he had something he wanted to give to Taffy, that we would put in her beautiful coffin.

"Can I take it back?" the 7-year-old asked.

We sat on the couch while the vet explained what she would do. Austen's eyes got big when she shaved Taffy's leg where the injection would go. After the drugs were injected the vet checked with the stethoscope, and said, "She's gone."

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"Did she feel anything?" He had to ask.

Austen and the vet went out and saw the coffin lowered into the hole that had been prepared.

Austen explained, "She wasn't here any more."

In Austen's eyes I found sadness, and understanding. There were silent tears. No fear.

These days, Austen still asks questions about Taffy. It is his tribute, his way of keeping Taffy alive.

Judy Kirschner is a retired teacher, a gardener and animal lover. She is the mother of Danielle and the grandmother of Austen.