

# Raising Arizona's Homeless Children with My Canine Companion

By Debra J. White, MSW



I teach kindness, compassion and empathy to Arizona's homeless children with my dog, Luke. We're from Gabriel's Angels whose philosophy is to break the cycle of violence in abused and at-risk children through pet therapy.

On our first visit at LaMesita Family Shelter in the summer of 2001 a dozen children swarmed around me and Luke, all begging for a piece of my dog, a wiry-haired mutt I adopted from the county shelter.

"Luke wants to meet you too, but everyone has to line up to be introduced," I said, attempting to maintain order around children

jostling to be first. "There's plenty of time. You'll all have a chance to pet my dog."

After each child stroked Luke's head, told him he was a good boy, and rewarded him with a treat, they settled down. As we sat around a table, they peppered me questions about Luke's habits. What does he eat? Where does he sleep? Does he watch the Animal Planet? At the end of our visit, I reminded the children that Luke and I would return every Tuesday afternoon. That was the beginning of my rewarding six-year journey with Arizona's homeless children.

A serious pedestrian car accident on January 6, 1994 ended my working career. When I adopted Luke I thought about pet therapy because of his mild manners. Pets helped me heal when I was in recovery so I wanted to return the favor.

Homeless children are often emotionally fragile. Some had beloved pets ripped from them when their families' lives crumbled. In some cases, lucky dogs and cats were cared for by friends or relatives. Others were given up to animal shelters with uncertain fates. Losing a pet leaves children feeling confused, uncertain and angry.

Adjusting to a homeless shelter can also be traumatic. Not only have these children been banished from their homes, they've changed schools and severed community ties. They left behind neighborhood friends. Luke and I bring stability along with hope.

The population at the LaMesita shelter shifts constantly. Some families stay briefly while others remain for the maximum four months. In exchange for free housing and child care, parents have to secure employment, a place to live, or both. Able-bodied parents pitch in and perform chores to keep the shelter tidy. Each family is assigned a case manager to ensure a smooth transition to independence. Families actively using drugs or alcohol are excluded.

Some children come with single mothers. Others arrive with both parents. Now and then single dads find themselves at LaMesita. On a few occasions, I've met grandparents who lost everything but refused to give up. Most families scrape by in low-wage jobs. Health care, if it's offered, is usually beyond their means. Affordable housing is the big hitch. Demand for a decent place far exceeds supply, especially for large families.

I focus on the children. Over the years hundreds have passed through LaMesita. I can't remember them all, but each and every child mattered. Along with my dog Luke, we taught good will not just for animals but for each other.

One week two adorable pig-tailed girls got into a brawl while we assembled a jigsaw puzzle. I

separated them and said, "Ladies, please stop fighting. Tell me what all this is about."

"She called my mother a name," Veronica said jabbing her finger at Tracy. "No I didn't," Tracy said, as she lunged at Veronica. I pressed myself in between them.

"This has to stop," I said. "No screaming, yelling, or hitting. You two make up. Who will say sorry first?" Faces gnarled, the two girls sat with their arms wrapped around their bony chests.

"Veronica? Tracy? Who will it be? We don't have all day," I said, glancing at the rest of the kids eager to resume the puzzle. When neither girl spoke, I headed towards the door.

"Where're you going?" Veronica asked. "What about Luke?"

"I'm leaving," I said, holding my dog by the leash. "As long as you two are acting up, there's no point in me staying. The other children don't like it when you fuss and argue either. Luke and I are going home."

Veronica and Tracy quickly made up. Although I have a master's in social work, I lacked training in early childhood development. I wasn't sure what to do but my idea seemed to work, at least for the moment. I came back and we finished the puzzle.

Luke's winning ways charmed the children, some of whom needed special attention. Workers explained that Kevin, a sandy haired seven-year old in a wheelchair, didn't talk. Because of his spastic movements and inability to walk, I assumed he had cerebral palsy. Kevin's school bus dropped him off after I started our session so he joined in later. Luke rubbed up against Kevin and he giggled.

"You like dogs?" I asked. Kevin nodded that he did. "We come every Tuesday," I said. I guided his hand along Luke's fluffy back, watching Kevin's eyes gleam as Luke slobbered on his hand.

"Luke's silly, isn't he?"

We followed this routine for a few weeks when one day Kevin whispered, "The dog."

"Luke's right here, Kevin," I said. "He's a good boy, isn't he?" Kevin smiled as Luke sat next to him. Afterwards, I knocked on the supervisor's door. "Kevin talked to me," I said. "albeit briefly and in a barely audible voice. Does he get therapy for his CP?"

Vaughn, the worker, said, "He doesn't have CP. His mother's ex-boyfriend Joe bashed his head in when he was a toddler."

"He what?" I blinked back tears.

"Kevin's cries irritated this goon and he went nuts," Vaughn said. "Joe whacked him from one side of the room to the next."

Sniffing, I thought of this adorable, sweet child who would spend the rest of his life confined to a wheelchair because of a cold-hearted brute. Due to privacy laws, Vaughn wasn't free to talk about the family's current situation or what happened to the ex.

A few weeks later, I read stories to the children. Katy, Kevin's five-year-old sister, sat next to me. Out of nowhere, she tugged on my arm and said, "Joe made Kevin cry. He used to hit him."

I was totally unprepared. Social work school or volunteer training hadn't prepared me for this.

"Joe's in jail now," Katy said. Then she changed the subject and

talked about a spelling test she passed. The family moved out several weeks later. I often think about Kevin and regret that his life will always be compromised by senseless violence.

One afternoon, I brought math flash cards. Homeless children sometimes do poorly in school because of the disruptions they face. If large families are cramped into a one room apartment children rarely have quiet time for homework. Stressed out parents may not help children with their studies. And children may react to their parent's anxiety about finding a place to live and not concentrate on their work. Any extra time I spend with them is a plus.

As we went around the group with subtraction cards, a freckle faced boy about twelve years old had tears in his eyes. His lips quivered. I put down the cards and asked, "Jarrod, what's wrong?"

"I was bullied on the bus by a bunch of girls," he said, glancing at the floor.

"Tell me about it," I said.

A group of homeless girls living in another shelter whacked Jarrod and his younger brother Jimmy a few times with their backpacks. Then, they blasted them with a slew of curses that crushed Jarrod's feelings. He asked the bus driver to make the girls stop but to no avail. I knocked on the supervisor's door and asked Vaughn to step in. The school

principal needed to know what happened.

"This is a serious problem," I said.

"I already called and left a message," Vaughn said. "I told the school secretary what happened. She said the principal left for a district meeting but he'll call me first thing in the morning. If not, I'll call him. We take bullying very seriously at LaMesita."

I scrapped the flash cards and spent the rest of the session engaging the children in a discussion about bullying. We talked about why it happens, how to prevent it, and what to do if someone bullied them. As I left with Luke at my side, I waved goodbye. A single tear crawled down Jarrod's cheek. He had the saddest face I'd ever seen. I held his hand and said I was sorry. Luke sat next to Jarrod and handed him a paw. For a tiny second, Jarrod cracked a smile.

About once a month, I bring a stethoscope and let the children listen to Luke's heartbeat. They're fascinated.

"Luke has feelings too," I said, as each child takes a turn listening to the thumping inside Luke's chest. "He feels happy, he feels sad and pain hurts him."

"Who'd want to hurt Luke?" a little boy asked.

"I hope no one would," I said.

"Making animals cry is bad and so is hurting each other."

Grooming is also another popular activity. I bring a few brushes and each child gets a chance to brush Luke. My dog rolls on his back and patiently goes through the process. He's never resisted, even when one boy put a Walk Man on Luke's ears while he spruced him up.

Any number of reasons can shove working families off the edge. The car breaks down and families can't afford repairs or a replacement. Job loss follows. Absent parents fail to pay child support and the state, with meager resources, can't track down the deadbeat dad or mom. A child's illness consumes their meager savings.

**M** My dream is that homelessness will end not just in Arizona but across America. Watching families struggle tugs at my heart. Most of them are decent people who've stumbled across hard times with few resources to help claw their way out. I have only myself and my dog.

Luke and I will return each week and impart our canine wisdom to soothe the children's wounded souls and bring cheer into their mixed up world. This is our service to Arizona's homeless children.

