

There's a Dog for That

Oliver makes living with Parkinson's much easier.

BY KATHRYN CROSBY

I am not an animal person. I have little interest in going on safari in Africa, and you won't find me visiting a zoo by choice. I even stumble over the word "veterinarian." So how did I become the proud owner of a dog?

Oliver appeared, misplaced or displaced, on our street corner early one Sunday morning. Our canine sentinel stared at traffic for almost four hours. Waiting. When my husband offered some water, Oliver eagerly followed him home, tail waving like a checkered flag.

I first saw the endearing creature bouncing in and out of the water sprinkler in our front yard and into my heart. It never once occurred to me that he didn't belong there. We named him after Charles Dickens' famous orphan. Like an old-fashioned Englishman, our Oliver has a luxurious tweed-colored coat—brindle, they call it—and he is perfect in every way except one, say the neighbors: When Oliver hears a siren in the distance, which happens often since we live near a fire station, he stretches his neck skyward and howls. Satisfied with the clarity of his trumpet, Oliver relaxes back into regal repose.

Four years ago, while in the hospital following back surgery, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease (PD). To be honest, it barely registered. In a way, God spared me the news, as I was too busy dealing with the pain, physical therapy, and recovery associated with my back. It's important to take one major life adjustment at a time.

But PD is definitely on my radar now. In fact, it speaks to me every day, some louder than others, though I muffle the noise with rigorous exercise. Neurologists recommend regular exercise and strengthening programs to combat the symptoms of PD. At least one expert in the field, Michael Rezak, M.D., Ph.D., believes that exercise

may be as beneficial as medication for his patients.

After I was diagnosed with PD, Michael Lichtenstein, M.D., my primary care physician, handed me a prescription for tai chi, strongly encouraging me to try it. Research shows that tai chi can improve balance and reduce the risk of falls. I relish the graceful movements that help keep me grounded emotionally as well as physically and consider it as much fun as dancing.

I am also enrolled in an aquaworks cardio class twice weekly and try to walk at least 30 minutes a day. When I first began exercising after my surgery, I wasn't sure that I could still run. Now confident in the water and on the treadmill, I can see how far I have pushed myself. My neurologist, Samuel Neeley, M.D., (who is a member of the American Academy of Neurology) believes that I can live this way for another 30 years. I am fortunate that great care and advice from my doctors seems to be making a difference, and I'm encouraged to continue working out since it is obviously successful for me. And yes, I can run!

Did I tell you Oliver can open his own gate? I should be so gifted. Compared to our newest family member, I am definitely a work in progress. But thanks to him, I have learned to welcome each day with openhearted joy, and I revel in his boundless freedom of movement even when mine is limited.

Here's the deal: Add a dog's spirit to your life. Go into the garden and bury seeds like they bury sticks, yank up weeds, catch butterflies, watch a fledgling as it learns to fly, jump over walls, chase after balls, act like royalty, be admired for your loyalty, tempt fate, find your soulmate, shake your booty, and even howl at the moon. Just for fun.

Kathryn Crosby lives with Oliver and her husband, Michael, in San Antonio, TX.

