

Before Thyme, Sleep Was a Stranger

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How does one describe life with very little sleep or rest? Our little son, JJ, has had seizures since he was about nine months old, and was diagnosed with Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), Asthma, vision impairment, Cerebral Palsy (CP) and seizures by his first birthday. This was followed by Mental Retardation (MR), high blood pressure, and Autism by the time he was two, and it just seems to continue.



JJ is not one to sleep through the night. Between seizures and reflux, we used to be up about 10-15 times a night. I was up most nights just making sure he wasn't having seizures.

One of his doctors mentioned getting him a service dog because JJ really didn't do much with other kids and couldn't go to school.

We searched online and found [4 Paws for Ability](#): this was the only nonprofit we could find that would do the training for a small child like JJ.

After going through the application/approval process and getting through the fundraiser, we were excited. Karen Shirk, executive directory of 4 Paws, was giving JJ the best birthday present he could ever have. Thyme joined our family in August of 2008, just after JJ's fourth birthday.

I had never seen a dog who could do seizure support, so I was a little worried. About three days after we got her, we were headed for 4 Paws for a day of training, and Thyme began pawing me and whining and touching JJ. Within five minutes, JJ had a seizure. I stopped worrying about her ability to spot seizures.

My other concern was how JJ was going to do with a service dog, because he really didn't do well with anyone but me. But a few days after we got Thyme, JJ was holding her in the car and hugging her (something we had never seen him do before) and sleeping more than two hours straight as long as she was with him. Another worry disappeared.

Perhaps three months after Thyme joined our family, I realized we were all getting a little more sleep, because I knew she would let me know what was going on, one way or another. One night JJ had a seizure and Thyme tried alerting me, but because she was trained not to bark when she was warning about seizures, I didn't hear her. So on her own she decided it was time to bark. I heard her and was able to see the seizure.

It wasn't long after when we noticed seizures weren't happening as often anymore. We took JJ to get his EEG done and were happy to see his seizures had slowed down. If you ask me, Thyme not only can alert seizures, but she is able to slow them down just by being there with him, playing with him and snuggling with him when he isn't feeling well.

We have gone through four surgeries since Thyme joined the family. During the first three, JJ went back to the children's ward after surgery and she was able to be with him during recovery, and of course in the room with him.



A couple of months ago, JJ cried more than normal, and nothing seemed to make him feel better. He wasn't running a fever and he didn't seem to have a cold, so I saw no reason to take him to the doctor. Since JJ's vision sometimes comes and goes, I figured he was having problems with his vision, and there is nothing I can do about that.

One morning I went to get him from bed and Thyme was right by him licking his ear. When she saw me, she started pawing me and licking his ear. After it happened again, I looked at his ear. JJ screamed and pushed my hand away, and Thyme went right to him and did it again.

I called the doctor and he said Thyme was probably telling us JJ had an ear infection (JJ had ear tubes in so I didn't even think about that). I took him to the doctor and told him what she had been doing and the doctor gave her a treat even before he told me what was going on. JJ had a horrible ear infection.

JJ was put on meds, and after 14 days we all thought it was okay, but a few days later Thyme was back licking his ear again. This time I didn't even call the doctor: I just took him in. The infection was back.

For the next two months, JJ had ear infections and Thyme always alerted me. After talking to JJ's doctor it was decided he needed to get his tonsils and adenoids out. We also learned he would have to spend a night in the pediatric intensive care unit (PICU).

A policy for most hospitals is that service animals can't go into the PICU/ICU. At this point, JJ's doctors tried to figure out a way, but not knowing how bad JJ was going to be after surgery, they had to put him in the PICU, and Thyme couldn't be there. Surgery day came and my mother came over to stay with Thyme. We all knew it wasn't going to be a good day for either of them.

Mom took Thyme out to the yard while I drove away with JJ. I had a crying baby all the way to the hospital. We were in the room waiting for the doc to come in. JJ was not having any of it.

Thyme wasn't there and he wasn't going to let this doctor put an IV in him. It took three nurses and the doctor to do this, and by the time they were done, they all started thinking Thyme needed to be there with JJ.

After the surgery, JJ was taken to the PICU where he woke up screaming and moving his hands around looking for Thyme. We were in the PICU for about three hours before someone looked at his record and noticed that Thyme was mentioned. The PICU headmaster came in and asked me if there was something they could do to make him feel better, like bringing his dog there and letting her be with him.

I had to push for the doctor to let us go to the regular room so Thyme could come to be with him. They agreed, but it would be about five more hours before that could happen. I knew he wasn't going to settle down. The more he screamed the more he was going to be in pain and the longer we were going to have to stay in the PICU.

Desperate, I called my mother and told her to bring Thyme to the hospital. At this point the worst that could happen was that they would make us leave the PICU. Once they arrived, I told our nurse that it would only take five seconds to get him settled down if Thyme could come up.

The nurse went to talk to the headmaster who talked to JJ's doctor who thought it was worth a shot. *Yes!* I went out got Thyme and brought her to the PICU. She ran into the room, jumped on the bed and not even two seconds later, JJ was all smiles.

Needless to say, everyone was amazed that a child who had been screaming for hours was smiling a couple of seconds after his dog jumped on the bed with him.

Thyme made history in the hospital that day. She was the first dog to have ever gone into the PICU and the first dog to have ever been invited back to the PICU.



Thyme was also trained to track, and she can track JJ with no problem anywhere in a store, in the hospital, or anywhere we go. My husband once took her out of a store to go see if she had to relieve herself, and once they went back in she pulled him all the way to where JJ and I were, so she could check on him.

We can't keep them apart for long. The only time they're apart is when he is in surgery (and she paces all over the waiting room looking for him) or when she goes to the groomers or vet (for shots and check-ups). Thyme has learned to pick up JJ's toys and give them to him, and of course, sometimes she shares her toys with him.

Many things changed when we got Thyme. JJ smiles more. He has a good friend who doesn't bother him and is not on top of him all day (like Mom). They're partners in crime (he likes to

hold onto her leash and she likes to pull him while he is holding on to it: it's a game they like to play).

Thyme knows JJ's limits on how much he can take from doctors and therapists and anyone else who may be around him. If she senses him getting close to his limits, she will just stand up between whatever is going on and JJ: that's the clue that things need to be stopped for a little while.



Even JJ's doctors and therapists know this, and they'll stop whatever they are doing and they let him take a break. They both have their own connection and that helps me a lot when it comes to knowing how far can we get with therapy and tests everyday.

Thyme makes it easier for me to do things around the house and she sure makes it easier for us to sleep better. She has made hospital stays and surgery recoveries a lot less stressful for us and the nurses in the hospital. Changing diapers,

giving baths, and daily living have been a lot better all the way around since she became part of our family.

If anyone has any doubts of what these dogs can do, all they have to do is see JJ and Thyme to see how well they work together and how much they love each other. We are very happy with the great match Karen and Jeremy found for JJ. And everyone is much more rested!