

Hello, Norma Jean

Have you heard that awesome song by Elton John about Marilyn Monroe? It's called "Candle in the Wind," and it's where I got my name.

Hello, this is Norma Jean. I'm a nearly two-year-old golden retriever and the fifth golden to my parents Sandy and Jerry Coker. I came to them by way of their dear friend Vonnie Peterson, who breeds goldens at her home outside Cleveland, Ohio.

Because my dad retired from his law practice four years ago, he had time to work with me from my very early puppy stage. I wanted to learn and was eager to please. Early on, I started getting the newspaper at the bottom of our long driveway. Mom and dad say this comes in really handy on cold, rainy mornings! We walk every day; our usual route is Westover to Brookdale, then up Manor Ridge to Dellwood, and then down Woodward Way to Memorial Park. I know it sounds like bragging, but people are drawn to me, and I've made a lot of new friends. I'm also a big hit with some of the merchants at Peachtree Battle Shopping Center.

Dad first noticed how good I was with people when he took me to Saint Anne's Terrace on Northside Parkway. He started reading poetry to a group of residents there about three years ago. They love it when he brings me along, so I greet them one by one and

then curl up in a corner when the session starts. The ministers and staff at Northside United Methodist Church also look forward to my weekly visits.

My dad is still laughing (I think) about something funny that happened a few weeks ago. Mom was visiting her mother in Columbus and had taken me with her while dad stayed home. Dad went for a walk, and by the time he'd gone about a quarter-mile, two people had stopped their cars and asked, "Where's Norma Jean?" Not "Hi, Jerry, how are you?" just "Where's Norma Jean?" I think he's used to it. In dad's own words, "She's the star. I'm just the old guy at the other end of the leash."

My biggest accomplishment to date is passing my "Happy Tails" therapy dog test in October 2017. After a suggestion from our friend and neighbor Beth Cunningham, a truly wonderful thing happened, and I got involved with Happy Tails, a nonprofit organization that started in 1991. As its mission statement says, "Happy Tails volunteers share the unconditional love of their pets with

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Coal and Norma Jean enjoying some sibling time.



Norma Jean at Northside United Methodist Church



Looks like Norma Jean is reflecting - or looking for squirrels!



Jerry Coker and Norma Jean - certified with Happy Tails!

people of all ages with physical, social, emotional, and cognitive needs at healthcare facilities, social agencies, and special-needs programs." Now I'm able to visit hospitals, rehab centers, nursing homes, and other facilities where people need some comfort. It's just awesome to be able to provide a few minutes of happiness to folks who are hurting. I've even gone to some schools to help students de-stress during exam week, and that was a lot of fun! I hope anyone with a kind and gentle dog or cat like me will give serious consideration to becoming a Happy Tails volunteer.

Because of my involvement in Happy Tails, my parents are asked a lot of questions. I wanted to allow them to answer them here:

1. May we pet Norma Jean? Absolutely, but thanks for asking. As a therapy dog, having people pet and talk to Norma Jean is what her "mission" is all about. Her job is to help people de-stress and relax. That's different from service dogs, who typically have been trained to assist a person with a disability who needs the animal's help in order to perform certain life functions.

2. Why does Norma Jean wear a vest when she's making a visit to a hospital, nursing home, or rehab center? The vest tells people that she's a Happy Tails therapy dog. Plus, it's a red vest, and Norma Jean looks great in red.

3. Is Norma Jean like a regular dog? Yes, except when we are doing a Happy Tails visit. She loves to run in open fields, chase squirrels, and retrieve tennis balls and the Frisbee. But, when the Happy Tails vest goes on, she knows she's got a job to do, which is to calmly interact with patients and their families and to comfort them.

4. How long does a typical visit last? Each visit lasts about one to one-and-a-half hours. Afterward, Norma Jean is tired and likes to take a nap. But then about three hours later, she's ready to go for a long walk or play fetch.

5. How do I know if my dog could be a Happy Tails therapy dog?

The most important things are that your dog must have passed an obedience school test and have all her shots, while you must have the desire and commitment to be a Happy Tails volunteer. The Happy Tails test examines whether your dog follows your commands and most importantly whether she is a very calm dog even in a hectic environment where there are other dogs and people. We encourage you to go for it!

As for me, I think being a Happy Tails volunteer is very rewarding and a lot of fun. I hope we see each other very soon around the neighborhood!

"Goodbye,
Norma Jean"