

## **And They Called It Puppy Love ©**

**By Connie J. Schlosberg**

The sun is rising in the sky on a warm winter morning in Colorado Springs as service dog volunteer trainer, Stephanie Edquid, stands in a modern kitchen of her contemporary-styled home.

Today she is feeling sluggish but a bowl of oatmeal will give her the energy she needs. The tall, graceful lady fills her thermos with coffee, adding in two packets of Sugar in the Raw and a dollop of soy milk. She is wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt and navy blue Adidas shorts exposing her well-toned legs. The pixie-haired brunette grabs her thermos, a water bottle and an army-style backpack, and heads to the spacious living room to get Lenny.

Several pictures of dogs adorn the walls. One is an 8 by 10 photograph of a bride and groom smiling and posing with a white Labrador retriever. Lenny is waiting patiently near a mahogany cocktail table, eyeing the backpack Stephanie is carrying. She greets Lenny with a pat on his blonde head.

She inspects the backpack for the necessities: water, baby wipes, plastic bags, treats, and toys. “He’s my baby so I have to be prepared for anything,” she says laughing. She’s ready to go and so is Lenny. He’s tapping his feet on the hardwood floors and dancing in circles. It seems like a typical morning for a mother and her child, except this mother’s child is a four-month old Golden retriever.

Lenny is a foster puppy in training with Paws With A Cause, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Wayland, Michigan, which specializes in training service dogs for people with disabilities.

At eight weeks, he was discovered stealing golf balls at a country club and rummaging through garbage cans for food. When Stephanie rescued him from the animal shelter Lenny had a BB pellet wounds in his stomach. With his rough start in life, her veterinarian wasn't confident that Lenny could be a service dog.

Stephanie wants to give him a chance. She's been training dogs for about ten years, but Lenny may be her last one. She is forty-four years old and her patience is evaporating. She already has two pet dogs who absorb a lot of her free time. Her work day can last over ten hours; puppies realistically need training 24/7.

Stephanie says "Lenny come here." Lenny saunters over to Stephanie placing the pillow part of his paws on the hardwood floors. Not a sound is made. She takes out from the backpack a black leather leash and a turquoise cape with red trim in white letters; it says "Paws Foster Puppy."

Lenny allows her to put the cape on; the leash is another story. He growls a low murmur of protest. Stephanie admonishes him, "Lenny, no." He relents. Stephanie will be taking Lenny around town to "socialize" him to the human world. Puppy socialization is crucial for service dogs. Their main job is to help their owners with their day-to-day activities.

Their first stop is Wells Fargo Bank. A robust security guard stands in the foyer giving a disapproving shake of his head. Stephanie explains, "I'm with an organization, Paws With A Cause. I spoke with the bank manager the other day about acclimating Lenny to various places." He glances at Lenny's cape and says, "Okay, miss. I understand." Lenny sniffs the guard's black patent leather shoes.

Most patrons standing in line pay no attention to them. Stephanie feels a tug on her shorts. "May I pet him?" a curly redheaded little girl asks. She nods her head yes. At this stage of

training, petting is allowed. Once Lenny becomes a full-fledged service dog, he will be on-the-job and petting is discouraged since it distracts them from their trainers – or eventually their owners.

The next stop is the Cinemark Movie Theatre. The midday sun is glowing vibrantly outside the ticket booth. The sandstone pavement is wet from melting snow. Lenny slides forward towards a cardboard cutout of Nicholas Cage. Lenny is barking ferociously. “Woof. Woof.” Stephanie scolds him, “Silly dog. Lenny stop.” Lenny obeys. He spies a stunning, platinum-haired young woman. Lenny whimpers. She turns towards him smiling. Lenny’s floppy ears stand at attention. Stephanie chuckles, “Oh you’re such a flirt.”

Inside the movie theatre, laser beams and machine gun fire are bellowing from the game room distracting Lenny. He stands up trying to climb to the top of the pinball machine with his paws. “Down Lenny,” Stephanie says.

The disco ball, blue lights, and multitude of strange noises with children running in different directions are too much for Lenny. Besides the smell of butter popcorn has his nose twitching.

They head toward the bright red and yellow snack counter. Lenny’s charcoal button eyes widened. There it is - a huge machine with bright yellow kernels flying through the air! Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop like rapid gun fire. Lenny cowers. A glass counter displays a rainbow of candy: Red licorice, black licorice, Junior Mints, Snow Caps, M&M peanuts. Stephanie kneels down and says, “Shall we get some popcorn Lenny?” He approves with a high-pitched bark.

It’s dark inside the movie house with stadium style seating. The room is half-filled with people, mostly families. Stephanie sits in a red cushioned chair near the fluorescent lit exit door. Several ticket holders behind them grimace. One whispers, “I can’t believe she brought a dog in here.” Stephanie turns her head and glares. What is the purpose of taking him to the movies?

The movie they're seeing is *Bridge to Terabithia*. Lenny settles upon Stephanie's lap. She fishes through the backpack for a doggie treat and a plush doll. Lenny gobbles up the treat, licking his chops afterward. He grabs the doll with his incisors. The stereo system crackles. It's show time. Lenny perks up. Stephanie rubs his head, tickling the outer edges of his ears.

One hour into the movie a toddler screams. Lenny puts his head down. Restless legs are scuffling behind Stephanie and Lenny. Someone slurps the remaining liquid from an empty soda cup. Lenny remains seated. A sneeze and a God bless you. Lenny stays seated. He is a good dog.

Two hours later the movie ends. The lights are gradually brightening the theatre. Lenny jumps down from Stephanie's lap. A middle-aged couple approaches Stephanie, "We are so impressed with your dog. He behaves better than the kids!" Stephanie agrees, "Good Lenny!"

Walking down the long hallway back to the front of the theatre, Lenny stops by the water fountain. He promptly squats down and makes a bowel movement. Does this mean that he didn't like the movie? Stephanie is nonplussed, "Lenny!" Some teenage girls point at her and giggle. She quickly digs into the backpack and pulls out a sandwich bag and a couple of baby wipes. Lenny's ears hang low. He glances up at Stephanie; his fluffy tail is limp. She shakes her finger at him, "Lenny, no!"

The final stop before going home is the Safeway grocery store. The sun starts its journey down behind Pikes Peak. The warm air has turned to cold. Stephanie parks her red Camry in the parking lot. Rubbing her bloodshot eyes, she reflects on Lenny's behavior in the hallway of the movie theatre. She looks back at Lenny and says, "We've come so far, but we still have a long way to go, Lenny."

Taking a last swig from her water bottle, she finds some energy.

Stephanie challenges Lenny to a race to the grocery store's front door. She says, "Ready, set, go!" Lenny sprints while she grabs tight of his leash. Her long legs fumble over the curb. Slowing down once they reach the sliding doors, Stephanie finds a red racing car shopping cart just inside the front of the store and says, "Hop in Lenny." He's panting from his sprint, wet pink tongue dangling from his mouth. Lenny hops in the front seat in the racing car.

Strolling down the dairy aisle, he sees various wheels of cheese: cheddar, Swiss, brie. He licks his mouth and attempts to stand up. "Woof."

Stephanie peers over her cart to look at Lenny. They stare at each other. Lenny settles back down.

She reaches in her backpack and puts a doggie treat in Lenny's mouth. It's getting closer to dinner time and Lenny hasn't eaten anything nutritious since his bowl of IAMS in the early morning. "Let's pay for the groceries Lenny and we'll have dinner as soon as we get home," says Stephanie.

At the checkout line, Maria, a pretty black-haired cashier looks in the cart. She says, "*Hola.*" She pets his blond coat. He brushes his tongue against her petite hand. "He's going to make someone a nice friend some day," she says.

The last stop is home. The lights go out as the sun sets behind Pikes Peak. Stephanie yawns. Her hair hangs lifeless against her face. Their day is almost over. Lenny will need eighteen months of command training and puppy socialization before he moves on to specialized training depending upon his new owner's disability.

At home in the kitchen, Stephanie refills Lenny's silver-plated water bowl. He laps it up; his tongue catching each drop as it falls. Both look content to be at home. She's sitting at her round cherry wood kitchen table with piles of "Better Homes and Garden" magazines stacked in the

middle. A second pile of mail rivals the magazines. The aroma of coffee beans still lingers from this morning.

Her eyes well up with water and a tear falls down her pale right cheek. She crumples a tissue from her pocket to wipe it away. She decides Lenny will be the last one. This decision has been on her mind for a long time now. She knows that she can't continue with dog training with her demanding workload as a director of an office that oversees several multi-million dollar government contracts.

Soon, Lenny will have a job and a new special home.

It won't be easy giving up someone who has been a part of her life. Someone joined at her hip. Trainers and trainees. Mothers and babies.

"Well Lenny," Stephanie says as she gains her composure, "How about next week we see a hockey game?" Lenny looks up from his near empty food bowl. "Woof. Woof." Stephanie chuckles, "I'll get the tickets."