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BARKER The Dog With Two Last Names

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by Star Johnson



The hot dog, clutched in the hand of a small boy, hovered mere inches from the nose of an 80-pound Chocolate-English-Labrador-Retriever. In the ordinary world, the hot dog would be history. But when the boy in question is a 2007 Make-A-Wish child, and the Lab is Barker who is Sherry Buchbinder's (TDI) Certified-Therapy-Dog, and "Ambassador-Barker" the Canine-Ambassador for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, the hot dog is completely safe. How did a young Labrador Retriever (a breed infamous

for lengthy puppy hoods) become so responsible?

Barker's life didn't start out smoothly. "Products" of an unsavory environment, he and his sister had little defense against their filthy surroundings and complete lack of care. By the time they were rescued, the 10-week-old puppies were deathly ill. Rushed to an Emergency Veterinary Clinic where Sherry's sister-in-law Kim worked, the pups were grimly diagnosed with Advanced-Parvo. It was hoped the little female would pull through, (she did). The little male however, was not expected to survive.

Resisting the recommendation to "put-him-down," Kim crusaded to keep the little male alive. Her determination paid off. With a healthy four-month-old puppy in her arms, Kim called Sherry and said, "I've got your dog!" Sherry wasn't looking for a puppy. She had two dogs of her own, and two others from a sister staying with her. But Kim insisted the puppy was meant to be hers. Indeed, it was love at first-sight.

Which brings us to how Barker got his name? "I know something about barking!" says one of Barker's fans, a woman owned by a Sheltie (a breed infamous for their barking), "But I've never heard Barker bark." Come to find out, Barker isn't named after a behavior, he's named after a person Sherry's Hero, a United States Military Veteran-Navy Pilot, dear-friend, and Adopted-Dad, "Mr. Lynn C. Barker." "I had fallen in love with the puppy, but was hesitant about bringing him into a home with four other dogs," explains Sherry. Lynn, who lives right next door, used to raise Labrador-Retrievers. "He had recently lost his beloved friend Sammi a 14-year-old cockapoo. I knew he'd love the puppy, so I asked if he wanted to keep him." "It was okay because I knew I'd get to play with him every day." But Lynn did something unexpected, muses Sherry. "He said no. He's your dog!" Named in Lynn Barker's honor, Barker--Buchbinder is "The dog with two last names."

"Shortly after Barker arrived, he did something amazing," Sherry describes. "He sat and watched his dad Rhein, go outside each morning and bring back a newspaper. One morning Rhein opened the door and Barker ran out. Thinking our new puppy ran away, we yelled for Barker to stop, but he refused!" "Before we knew it, Barker returned with the newspaper, and he continues to retrieve it every morning."

For the first two years of life with Sherry, her husband Rhein, and the other four dogs, Barker was a typical Lab-puppy bouncing around and into everything! That began to change when Sherry underwent knee surgery. "Coming home from the hospital, I worried that Barker was going to bounce around like his usual self and come down on my knee," recalls Sherry. Instead, Barker sat quietly by Sherry's side. "I couldn't believe it," "He just did it on his own."

When Barker turned three, two events occurred that showcased Barker's true potential. First, Sherry underwent two more knee surgeries. And second, Dozer, the family's alpha-dog, died. "Barker just stepped up to the plate." Sherry explains, "I was in a wheelchair at first. And eventually I needed the use of a cane." "It was difficult for me to get around." Barker again just knowing what to do, began helping Sherry. He assists with her balance, and provides stability while Sherry climbs or descends incline walk ways and stairs. He also learned how to bring in the mail (With guidance from Sherry and the help of Doug, who is a USPS employee). Barker soon became Sherry's - indispensable- Service Dog!

Sherry signed him up for the AKC -Canine Good Citizen- certification test while watching the 2006 Wags-For-Wishes event (Benefiting the Make-A-Wish Foundation, San Diego-Chapter). "Barker passed with flying colors." "When evaluators, who were from the Hidden-Valley-Obedience-Club, saw how well Barker and I worked together, they kept saying, we can't believe he's not a Therapy dog," "I didn't know anything about therapy dogs, so I asked them a ton of questions." Diane Fontane, from the HVOC was so helpful and enthusiastic she inspired me to "do-what-we-do," says Sherry.

They returned to San Diego, Ca. For the Wags-For-Wishes event in 2007, Sherry volunteered with Barker now, a Certified Therapy Dog with Therapy Dogs International (TDI). They visited with the Make-A-Wish children, their families, and guests who attended the three-day event. Before work, Barker is bathed, his teeth are brushed, the harness, collar, and leash are sanitized, "that's when he knows we're going to work!" Paws and ears are disinfected both at home and again just prior to going into a facility. Barker doesn't mind the almost-daily baths, and he thoroughly despises being dirty. "We call him our white collar-dog" says dad, Rhein. Returning home from an outing in the great out-of-doors, Barker ran to the shower and jumped in. It was like he was saying. "Get it off! Get the dirt off!" Sherry laughs.

As Make-A-Wish volunteer's, Sherry and Barker work with the Arizona Chapter, and several other Chapters in California. Assisting each chapter with many of the volunteer tasks available within the organization. "We volunteer with Sponsor-Award

Presentations, Community-Awareness Events, Medical-Outreach, Wish-Maker Luncheons, Fund-Raising Events, Kids-For-Wish-Kids Program, Wags-For-Wishes Events in California and Arizona.” “Oh yes, as Sherry smiles, Wish-Granting too!”

"If Barker works three or four days in a row, he just crashes the next day." But if a couple of days go by and he hasn't gone to work, he'll nudge his vest, make little vocalizations, and stare at me with those "big-yellow-eyes."

Through his volunteer work as Canine-Ambassador for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and Wags-For-Wishes, Barker has become a "Pet-Celebrity." While in Phoenix for Wags-For-Wishes, they visit the Arizona-Chapter Wish-House (Where Wishes Began). "We were invited to Phoenix, Az. and visited the entire staff at the National-Office of the Make-A-Wish Foundation of America, in February 2009." "We are welcome anytime," I look forward to returning in the Fall while promoting Arizona Wags-For-Wishes, and again while attending the event held each January, says Sherry proudly.

Therapy work can be exhausting, for both dog and the handler. Sherry and Barker were once asked to visit a young ICU patient who had bonded with Barker during earlier visits. "We didn't know it," "but they were going to disconnect life-support while Barker and I were there." "I was completely unprepared, and it was really hard for both of us." "However, our presence truly helped the family during an extremely difficult time." "We made a difference," says Sherry quietly.



As volunteers' in the Pet-Therapy Program at Kaiser-Permanente they visit with patients, staff members, and visitors at the Southern California Hospitals located in the Inland-Empire, and San Diego. (They volunteer most often at the Riverside, Ca. facility). Sherry and Barker also, visit with patients at other Southern California Hospital's, Convalescent Facilities, and residents of Senior Housing complexes.

Barkers may be the first therapy dog to become a Canine-Ambassador for a non pet related, nonprofit organization. In fact, he may be the first therapy dog invited to work at a Zoo. In December 2008 Barker was a special guest at the Santa Ana Zoo located in Santa Ana, California. Sherry and Barker were asked to participate and greet arriving guests during "Dream night at the Zoo," (a very special event for local children living with life threatening medical conditions and their families), during the "Holiday Lights Festival." "We also, returned for an additional night open to the public," says Sherry.

They volunteer with and for Animal-Rescue organizations encouraging people to Spay, Neuter, and Adopt. Sherry, guides people with an interest in pet therapy, who want to become involved, and has a potentially qualified dog, how to get therapy certified. "As a handler, it's rewarding to see a smile on the face of a patient, visitor, staff member, or a senior citizen when you and your dog enter a room."

"We also, educate people about working Service-Dog's," says Sherry. "These dogs provide mobility, independence, and some alert to medical situations, saving lives." She advises people that service dogs assist many types of disabled individuals, not only the blind. Sherry was born with a physical disability herself, she became educated first hand about working dogs through Barker, and respects the work these dogs do. Sherry enjoys educating people about these specially trained dogs (not just pets), and how they improve the quality-of-life for people such as her, and others with various types of disabilities.

Like a waved-in-your-face hot dog, for example. Or when a little girl used Barker's wagging tail as a jump rope, and the time, a small child gripped onto Barker's, ahem, nether-regions. Sherry admits, "Training can't possibly prepare you for everything," and "He just takes everything in stride and loves it!" Barker is uniquely described by a young Make-A-Wish child, the boy looked at Sherry and said, "Barker's as sweet as a Hershey-Kiss!" Once a patient they visited in the hospital told Sherry, "Barker is gifted." Dr. Tracy Paul says, "Barker is an incredible spirit-the absolute perfect Ambassador for Wags-For-Wishes. His heart space far exceeds the physical vessel that we see as Barker. Everyone who comes in contact with him leaves as a better, more loved person." "Barker is the top-dog," says Matt Gallant from (Animal Planet). And, "It's an honor to meet Barker," says Cesar Millan (The Dog Whisperer).

For fun, Barker enjoys his babies (stuffed animals), he especially likes the talking ones, catching Discs (a.k.a. Frisbee's), walks with mom on her electric scooter, or chasing a laser light at night. His mom, Sherry, is justifiably proud of her now-eight-year-old Lab's amazing self-discipline. After all, that self-discipline earned, Barker the education equivalency of a Doggie Doctorate, and the distinguished title "Ambassador-Barker"

Canine-Ambassador for the Make-A-Wish Foundation, in just one year. Sherry says about their success, "I had no idea what to do, it's just him," "I am truly blessed to have Barker in my life, and I cherish each day we share together." "We're a team!"

