

Getting to Know You! With Marcelle Gianelloni and Bennett

Sometimes, as your life circumstances change, you make what you think is a compromise. Such was the case for Marcelle Gianelloni as she sought a dog for her golden years. Marcelle was a devoted greyhound lover, and a large, 80-pound rescue dog (Finn) shared her home. Marcelle received a call about a two-year old whippet with severe separation anxiety that needed a new home. Bennett joined her family and after a lot of work and dog obedience school he became her “shadow”. Marcelle realized he was going to be a good therapy dog and checked out the website for WAGS.



Bennett turned out to be anything but a compromise! To start with, he was a good fit for the Gianelloni family which already included two cats. Bennett is a dog who loves, *really loves*, cats. Fortunately, Claire, their large black lap cat, shares his affection.

(Carmen, the other black cat in the household, is tolerant but not as attached.) Claire and Bennett can often be found lying next to each other. But Bennett’s interest extends outside the home, and his fascination with felines is much stronger than his interest in squirrels or other prey. This lack of prey instinct is unusual for a sight hound. But he stays true to breed in being an extremely fast



runner, and then after expending much energy, proudly flopping down for a hard nap with Claire. Bennett is a soft tan color, but dogs in his breed come in a variety of colors such as black, fawn, black and white, and brindle.

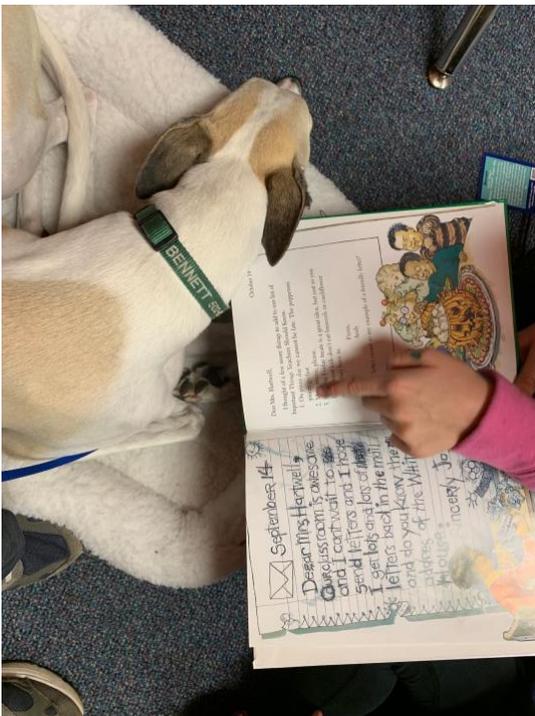
I first met Marcelle the day she came to the Hosparus offices for her Mentored Visit, and I was volunteering with the WAGS Evaluation team. Dottie, the Evaluation Chair, had done her homework and let us know that whippets are not big tail-waggers. And, their tails hang down between their back legs. Despite this difference in behavior, Bennett had no trouble showing his sweet nature and aptitude as a therapy dog.

Whippets are extremely easy to train, and very gentle. Despite his small size, Bennett has a deep “hello” bark, but Marcelle has never heard him growl. He is very attached to her, ready at the window when she’s a block from arriving home.

Like many of our dogs, Bennett’s certification process was hampered by Covid. But Marcelle gives the WAGS Board members high marks for keeping everyone engaged. She particularly enjoyed the outings in the parks, where social distancing was possible, but socializing and dog training continued. She also appreciated the zoom meetings; again, another chance to be with like-minded people. She proudly showed me Bennett’s portrait, painted by Micki Thomas, that she won in a WAGS raffle. And like many of us, she finds Linda Laun “a lovely woman – the spirit of us all.” She found WAGS to be a haven during those hard times.

Marcelle has been a life-long animal lover. She grew up as a third generation American in the tropics of Cuba. She loved her outdoor life there and had lots of pets including dogs, rabbits, a rooster, and parrots. She learned to check her shoes for tarantulas. She currently has a “Tarantula Crossing” sign in her backyard to remind her of those happy years. After moving to the States, she completed her education with a Masters in Early Childhood Education and another in Spanish. She is fluent in Spanish, and volunteers as an interpreter at the Family Community Clinic in Butchertown. For many years, she was very happy in her work as a first-grade teacher. But her volunteer work at the zoo with the giraffes led to a career swerve when she was offered the position of Curator of Conservation Education. The job entailed many outreach trips into the community with ambassador animals to “strengthen the bond between people and our planet.”

When she retired, WAGS became a natural follow-up to her life's work. She strongly believes in the mission of reaching out to the community, connecting people and animals, and making lives better. She feels it is of paramount importance to provide connection with the world around us and to the wonderful animals that reside with us. It is a way of "showing our humanity." And after so many years of appreciating the many volunteers at the zoo, she's thrilled to be "paying it back" with her volunteer work.



Marcelle and Bennett have "tried a bit of everything" for WAGS. They have joined the reading programs at Wheatley and Wheeler schools and the Highland Library. Marcelle is justly proud that, encouraged by Bennett's gentle nature, a young child who was in the school program and was very afraid of dogs ended it by petting her soft grey whippet.



On a Nazareth Home visit, Bennett slowly climbed up and curled next to a small woman who had not responded to anyone for some time. Slowly her arm reached out from under the blanket so she could pet him. Bennett has also found success at the airport, doing especially well going through security. And one day, he helped comfort a family going to a funeral. She was told "it is such a relief to have you here." At times, there's a lot of waiting at the airport, and she particularly remembers a large Latino family who enjoyed some Bennett cuddle time as they waited for the plane their son was taking to join the army.



Like many Waggers, Marcelle also has helped with “other duties as assigned.” She particularly enjoyed the work on the silent auction for the 25th Anniversary Dog Fashion Show.

Marcelle has worked with volunteers her whole career. She is proud that, as Americans, we are uniquely a nation of volunteers. Her conservation work to Mexico and Cuba helped her see this difference. Meals on Wheels, hospital helpers, school volunteers – we are a nation that counts on volunteers as part of our culture.

Her advice to WAGS newcomers? Go be a Trained Aide before you take your dog through evaluation. Not only is it enjoyable, but the experiences will make you a much better therapy team. Explore different venues – even ones you think might be outside your interest or comfort zone. This helps you find your niche when you do become a team. And always, always put the health, happiness, and safety of your pet first. Bennett is terrified of thunderstorms. Because Marcelle works with other Ambassador Teams, she can cancel if bad weather comes up at a visit time.

Marcelle has found that WAGS work allows her to combine all her passions: connections to the community, love of animals, concern for the environment, and education. She is living the saying taught to her by a patient at the Family Clinic “In our country, wealth is not measured in money, but in kindness.” She encourages everyone to share in this wealth.