

Rudy's Story . . . A Miracle In Progress

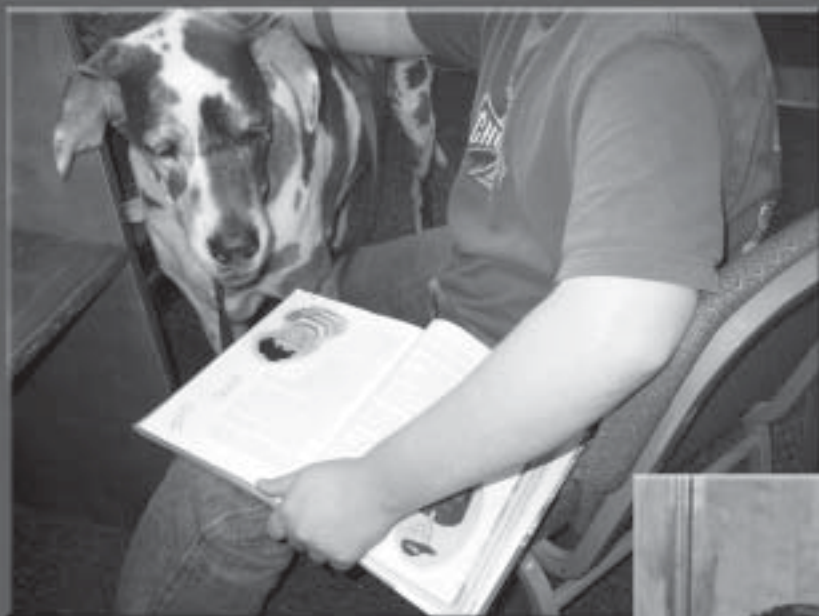
By Laura Hickey



Laura Hickey with "Rudy"



"Rudy"



It's All

In A



Days



Work!



Rudy's Story . . . by Laura Hickey

Courage, hope, survival... Where does a dog's real life begin? In a cold, dark deserted house in New Jersey? Or, in a school for broken hearts and fragile spirits in the mountains of North Carolina?

Purpose, love, healing... How did Rudy, a rescued Great Dane, make the spiritual journey from abandonment to discovering the ability to help nurture the recovering hearts of sexually abused children?

Rudy's story began in 2003 in an affluent New Jersey community. Rudy's owner was a successful career professional who unfortunately became involved with drugs. During his drug binges, he would neglect Rudy horribly. Concerned neighbors fed Rudy whenever they could get to him, and made food available when he was outside of the house. One day the neighbors heard Rudy howling much as a wolf howls before it dies. They became concerned that the owner may have been binging on drugs at home and died. When the neighbors realized the owner was no longer living in the house, they contacted the local police who found Rudy, an aging arthritic Great Dane, abandoned in the house and starving. The police impounded Rudy and then called Animal Control as well as the Humane Society.

The New Jersey Chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Great Dane Rescue League (MAGDRL) was contacted at this point and Rudy was taken to the home of Peter Quinto to be fostered until an adoptive family could be found for him. Giant breeds in general have shorter life spans and, at 8 years old, Rudy was considered a "senior" Dane. And, to complicate matters further Rudy was diagnosed with arthritis in his hips. His MAGDRL caretakers assumed it would be hard to find a forever home for an older Dane with medical problems.

In the fall of 2003 I saw Rudy's picture and story on the MAGDRL online discussion list. It was love at first sight and I immediately began adoption proceedings. In November I traveled to New Jersey to meet Rudy and his Foster Dad. During my visit I adopted Rudy, planning to give him a secure and loving home for whatever amount of time remained in his life. My plan was to give Rudy a richer life by training him to be a therapy dog in nursing homes. Little did I know that Rudy's lifework would be in my own back yard!

My job is Director of Residential Treatment at the Grandfather Home for Children located in the mountains of Western North Carolina. This facility is a mental health treatment provider, and temporary home where children heal and attend a charter school: Grandfather Academy, founded to serve the educational needs of these emotionally, physically, and sexually abused children.

During the period between Mother's Day and Father's Day 2004, both the home and school experienced the loss of several support staff members. These holidays are especially hard for children who, for many reasons, are separated from their parents. I knew something needed to be done quickly to fill the emotional gaps created by the loss of staff members. For some time, I had been seriously considering establishing an animal-assisted therapy program at the home. I approached the Director of the Grandfather Academy, Doug Herman, and the Language Arts Resource Intervention Specialist, Renee Rogers, about the possibility of Rudy being able to help the children in their classrooms. Both Doug and Renee agreed, given the urgency of the staff shortage, to give Rudy a chance to fill this void.

Because of Rudy's abusive background, the children were instinctively drawn to him and felt safe with him. In his own unique way, Rudy worked on healing the children's hearts. Miracles began to happen very soon after Rudy started attending classes and interacting with the children!

Seeing the marked improvement in the children, Doug, Renee and I decided it was time to formally launch the Pet Services Program at school with Rudy serving as the pilot dog. Rudy became an honorary staff member at Grandfather Academy. With a desire to expand the children's experience with dogs, I consulted the Coordinators of the NC Chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Great Dane Rescue League (MAGDRL) about the possibility of partnering with them to provide a foster home for another Dane. As a result, they chose Milo, a rescued Great Dane who was fostered and trained by a group of the children.

As the program has grown, several other mixed breed dogs have been brought into the school to work with the children. Recently a group of the children shouldered the task of fostering and training four Great Dane puppies. The process of caring for and working with the puppies, including finding adoptive homes for them, has been one they will remember and treasure for the rest of their lives.

With so many positive experiences, it was time to create a name for the children's rescue work. It was of the utmost importance for the name to reflect the sense of safety and empowerment the children have experienced with Rudy. Out of all the amazing names the children submitted, the acronym "**HELP**" ~ Helping Every Little Paw ~ was chosen as the name of the children's work with rescued animals.

I feel extremely privileged to spend my days observing Rudy opening the children's hearts and minds to the power of unconditional love. Witnessing the profound impact Rudy has on the children and the staff members who serve them is inspiring. Rudy simply pours love and acceptance from his eyes and the children receive it. By example, he has taught children to be sensitive to others and about the extraordinary gentleness of true power – no matter what your life experiences have been. One day, Rudy left a group of children playing to walk to a separate area where a child was disclosing abuse experiences to a child protective services investigator . . . without a prompt, to lay at her feet and be with her. His impact on individual children is now part of the discussion at treatment team meetings where mental health and social service professionals struggle to plan for high risk children.

There simply aren't enough words, pictures or stories to express the hero Rudy is to all of us. You really have to be there and hear the soft voices say "Goodnight, Rudy" from their bedrooms as I pick Rudy up after a day with "his" girls . . . or hear a child say "Hey, Rudy! Guess what!" and then continue to chatter as she walks to school with Rudy, her confidant. Those voices say it all!

Some thoughts from students and staff:

Tania J. age 14 (a student): "Reflecting back on my time with Rudy I have come to realize much about myself through my care and interactions with Rudy. When I first came to Grandfather Home, I wanted to become pregnant because I wanted to give something all the care and love I felt I had missed in my life. I was able to transfer this incredible love that I have in myself to Rudy. Since he was there with me, I learned, with the help of staff, how to care for him without messing up. This made me feel good about myself, and it helped to fill a hole in my heart. Rudy's slobbering kisses make me laugh. His welcoming facial expressions fill my heart with joy. Watching him trot around on walks brings a smile to my face. In general, I can not find enough words to express how Rudy has changed my life."

Jennifer B. age 14 (a student): "Rudy is a great support person and he really listens to what you tell him and he can't hold a grudge. Rudy's soft eyes and comical eyebrows tell you exactly what he is thinking. When you are having problems you can sit by Rudy and read to him while he listens to what you are saying. Talking to him about your feelings helps and sometimes you can hear what this wise old dog is telling you."

"Because of Rudy's size he can surprise you the first time, but just spending a little time with him you'll know why he is loved by so many people who come here. Rudy was abused and neglected and then he was adopted by a family that loves him. This makes Rudy an even better support person because we can relate to him. Rudy has issues with being separated from his owner. He will sit, whine and pout just like a kid when he sees her and can't go with her. He also listens to adult authority, which sets the example for us. Rudy stays in the class with us every so often so he can visit other classrooms too. We miss Rudy when he isn't with us but we cherish every moment we have with him while we can."

Doug Herman: "Our hero Rudy performs with the wisdom, charm, and patience of a veteran teacher. His work with our struggling readers has been more beneficial than we could have ever imagined. Even our most reluctant readers are eager to read to him, and he perseveres consistently demonstrating his support and non-judgmental active listening skills with all his students."

Renee Rodgers: "Heroes come in all shapes and sizes and Rudy, our devoted Harlequin Great Dane, is no exception. When you look deeply into the piercing blue eyes of this Gentle Giant you will not see the pain, abuse, or neglect he suffered in his younger years. What you will experience is the wisdom and understanding he has for our abused student population coupled with the unconditional love and compassion he feels toward everyone he meets. Rudy is honestly one of the most incredible *gentlemen* I have ever encountered! He truly is a naturally gifted service dog. He is, without a doubt, Grandfather Home and Academy's *Hero of the Year!*"

Rudy's Press Release

Senior Great Dane Receives 2005 Broadway Barks Hero Award

New York City – Rudy, a 10-year-old Great Dane from North Carolina, received the 2005 Hero award at the seventh annual Broadway Barks. The event, produced by Broadway Care/Equity Fights AIDS and sponsored by Animal Planet, Dogsters, The New York Times, Loews Hotels, and Sherpa, took place on Saturday July 30 in Shubert Alley.

Presented by Monty Python's *Spamalot* stars; David Hyde-Pierce, Christopher Sieber, Michael McGrath and Steve Rosen, the award was granted in recognition of Rudy's work with the children of Grandfather Home, a home and charter school for physically, emotionally, and sexually abused children located in Banner Elk, North Carolina. Receiving the award on Rudy's behalf was Laurie Zoock, Public Relations Director of MAGDRL, Mid-Atlantic Great Dane Rescue League, Inc.

The Broadway Barks Hero award is a certificate of recognition awarded to an animal or individual who has made a significant contribution to the community and/or to animal welfare. Past recipients have included various types of service dogs, as well as a dog that played a prominent role in search and rescue on 9/11. The first award was granted at Broadway Barks 4 in order to pay tribute to the dogs that showed such heroism and courage in their search and rescue efforts on 9/11.

"Rudy is a fine example of the many wonderful Danes that come through our rescue every year. Many who have experienced similar neglect and abuse still, like Rudy, have it in their hearts to love and trust people and to give back ten fold. I am extremely proud to be part of such a dedicated organization of volunteers. When you meet a dog like Rudy though, you can truly understand why there are such a large number of wonderful people so willing to give of their time to help this gentle breed." - Debra Rahl, President, Mid-Atlantic Great Dane Rescue League.

"My sincerest thanks go to Bernadette Peters, Mary Tyler Moore, and the producers of Broadway Barks for recognizing the power of Rudy's special mission! There simply aren't enough words, pictures, or stories to express the hero Rudy is to all of us at Grandfather Home. You really have to be there and hear the soft voices say "Goodnight, Rudy" from their bedrooms as I pick Rudy up after a day with "his" girls . . . or hear a child say "Hey, Rudy! Guess what!" and then continue to chatter as she walks to school with Rudy, her confidant. Those voices say it all!" - Laura Hickey, Rudy's adoptive Mom, Director, Residential Treatment, Grandfather Home

Hosted by Mary Tyler Moore and Bernadette Peters, Broadway Barks 7 is a star-studded dog and cat adopt-a-thon benefiting New York City animal shelters, rescue groups, and adoption agencies. Aided by an impressive group of Broadway stars who act as presenters for the homeless pets attending the event, Mary and Bernadette focus attention on finding permanent homes for these pets in addition to targeting educational efforts in regard to responsible pet ownership, spay/neuter, and the importance of pet identification. For more information on Broadway Barks go to: www.broadwaybarks.com

Read more about Rudy's work with the children of Grandfather Home by visiting their website at: www.grandfatherhome.org, then click on the *Rudy's link*. For more information about Great Dane rescue please visit MAGDRL's website at: <http://www.magdrl.org>

