

STARVING, INJURED CRUISER IS NOW A HEALTHY, HAPPY 'TRIPOD' THERAPY DOG

By Heidi Dahms Foster. Photos courtesy of Portrait Park by J and Laura Molinaro.



An injured reservation dog from Gallup, New Mexico is now comforting people who are dealing with their own injuries and illnesses.

Cruiser, a slightly larger than medium dog with a terrier's wiry fur, landed in Chino Valley Animal Shelter a thin, dirty, frightened 35 pound animal cowering in a run. When United Animal Friends rescuer Trudy Kannenberg saw him, his condition broke her heart.

Cruiser was found on a reservation near Gallup, New Mexico in early 2017, unable to move, emaciated, with a shattered leg and pelvis. He was taken to a high kill shelter there, and UAF acquired him through an ongoing partnership, Trudy said.



UAF asked Trudy if she would foster Cruiser when he arrived, but he turned out to be so ill that he first had to be hospitalized. Because he was starving and could not

move, he had eaten rocks and whatever he could reach. Those had to be removed from his stomach, and severe diarrhea treated. His condition touched Trudy's heart.

"I told UAF I'd foster him if they gave me naming rights. I wanted to give him a name that gave him hope. He was so sweet, it just oozed out of him," she said. "Cruiser was a hopeful name for a broken dog."

Efforts to rehab his leg were unsuccessful, so when his stomach issues were resolved, Cruiser underwent surgery in May 2017 to amputate the limb. Another UAF foster, Anita Kast, took care of Cruiser after his surgery when Trudy was out of town, and right away, he was up and running and chasing a ball. Anita filmed and posted a video to the UAF site.



That's when former Prescott Valley Police Commander Laura Molinaro came into the picture.

Laura and her husband, Robert Ziegler, lost their elderly Australian Shepherd, Bear, in May after the dog succumbed to a heartbreaking battle with cancer.

"We spent three weeks dogless after that, after 30 years of having dogs!" Laura said. "I'd been looking at the UAF website, and Robert said, 'one will come up.' We were sitting in a theater and while waiting for the movie, I was looking on the cell phone,

and saw Cruiser. We had seen him at Woof Down Lunch, but he was very timid."

Since she met Cruiser at Woof Down Lunch, however, the dog had come a long way, both in health and in demeanor. The video on the UAF website showed a happy, three-legged pup chasing a ball. Even Robert commented, "He's a cutie!"

Laura didn't waste any time after that. She got online and filled out the paperwork to meet Cruiser, and once tentatively approved, she set up a home visit.

When Cruiser arrived, he came right in, appropriated Bear's old bed, let everyone pet him, and rolled over for a belly rub. Trudy was pretty sure Cruiser had found his forever home, and she brought all of his "luggage" with her! Cruiser never left.

Cruiser doesn't generally have health issues because of his injuries, but Laura takes a bit of extra care to see that he doesn't get too tired, and that he eats properly to stay in optimum health. She is careful that he stays in the right weight so as not to put stress on his frame. He has gone from a 35 lb. frightened waif to a healthy 55 lbs. with bright eyes, a shiny coat and a winning personality. He's comfortable and calm around other dogs, and he absolutely adores people.

Laura didn't adopt Cruiser with the idea that he would become a therapy dog,

especially considering how timid he was the first time she saw him at Woof Down Lunch. But he had blossomed into a people magnet. In December 2017, Robert had back surgery at Yavapai Regional Medical Center.



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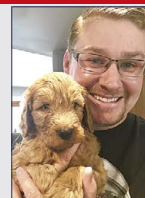
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Laura was in the waiting room when a therapy dog came to visit.

"I thought, 'how cute.' Then in January we were in California at Balboa Park. There was a field trip that day with kids everywhere. They saw Cruiser and just swarmed him. I knelt and they were all petting him and he was soaking it all up. He just loves people," she said.

After Robert's surgery, he, Laura and Cruiser walked at the mall. One day they ran into a handler whose dog Laura knew was a therapy dog at YRMC. She inquired about what it takes for a dog to become a therapy animal, because she felt by then that Cruiser was almost telling them that's what he wanted to do.

The two were referred to Debbie Lipely with Pawsitively Awesome, and began their training. Laura met with YRMC Volunteer Coordinator Nancy Thomas, and attended a certification to see what would be expected of a therapy dog team. She found Cruiser already had most of the skills, and signed up.



After completing Cruiser's training and her handler requirements, Laura took Cruiser to test for his certification in August, and did exceptionally well, a little to her surprise. Debbie told her Cruiser would do fine, it was Laura who needed to relax!

They shadowed an experienced team in early September, and then they were on their own.

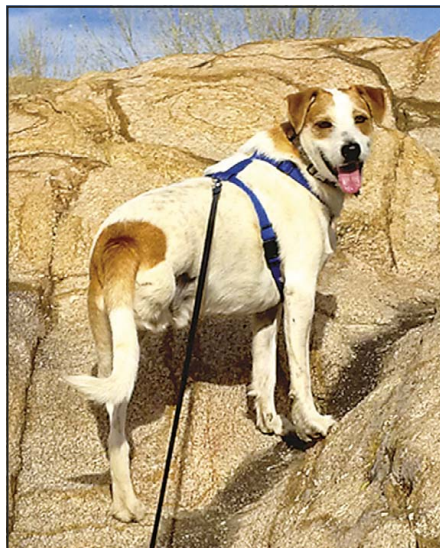
Laura found that weekends and holidays are a lean time for therapy dog visits as people generally have family commitments. Now retired, she has time on those days, so she has volunteered her and Cruiser's visits

then. "Who wants to be in the hospital at Christmas?" she said.

Not only does Laura have a heart for the hospital patients, she also notices those behind the scenes, the custodial and desk staff who are unseen but who keep the lobby pristine and greet everyone who comes in. They always are excited to see Cruiser.

Another very special aspect to Cruiser's therapy dog career is that those with disabilities can relate to him. During one visit to the Pediatric Unit, a group of children were excited to meet Cruiser as he visited a young patient. They had plenty of questions, and Laura was able to show how Cruiser has moved past his injuries and how much he now enjoys life.

"I explained that he's moved past (the injuries). He chases squirrels and rabbits, and his ball. He scratches, and if he can't reach a spot, I help," she said. She knows when to scratch because Cruiser cocks his head and moves the stump of his missing leg, indicating an itch!



During one visit to the mall, two people, one in a wheelchair and another with a scooter, approached Cruiser. The man, who had lost a leg, said, "Aw look, he has the same problem we do, and he's doing so well!"

A longtime Special Olympics supporter and coach, Laura likens Cruiser's enjoyment of life to the spirit of her Special Olympics athletes.

"I see that parallel. The athletes compete as if they don't have any issues. They've moved past that. It is sports in its truest form. It's the same with Cruiser. It's as if he knows he brings joy to people."

Cruiser especially loves children. "The smaller they are the higher his interest," Laura said. "And strangers are friends he hasn't met yet."

Now that Cruiser and Laura are a regular sight at the hospital and around town, people are beginning to recognize and greet them enthusiastically. They do eventually acknowledge Laura, but Cruiser is always the first for a pat and a belly rub. That's OK with Laura.

"He looks at people and they just melt. The word's out. It's neat to have a celebrity for a dog!"

Trudy asserts that Cruiser is one of UAF's favorite rescues. "But I'd probably tell you that about almost any of them. It's so cool to place them and see them go to good homes."

As Trudy sat with the thin, sick and hurting Cruiser when he first arrived in Chino Valley, she sat on the curb with him and made a promise. "I told him things would get better from here. Laura and Robert have kept that promise for me."

If you would like information about United Animal Friends, please visit www.unitedanimalfriends.org.



Starving, Injured Cruiser is Now a Healthy, Happy 'Tripod' Dog



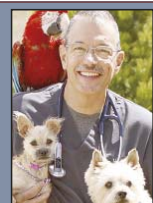
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