

Our Very Special Christmas Gift – Sedonia Kennicoot Fairweather

We named the only surviving puppy born on Christmas Day night in our home in 1998, Sedonia Kennicoot Fairweather (Dony – rhymes with pony). She was the only one of a litter of nine beautiful puppies born to the beautiful Alaskan Malamute, Kianna Fairweather, who survived. The others tragically died stillborn or shortly after their birth in our study, Dony was the only one who breathed properly and suckled from her mother. Pure white with beautiful, dainty features, pink floppy ears, a tail with a touch of gold at the tip and nails that looked as though she had received a French manicure, Dony was and looked angelic – the perfect gift to us for the season and the special holiday during which she was born. Her magnificent mother, Kianna, licked her baby all over constantly to keep her warm, her blood circulating and her baby stimulated and alive. She guarded, guided and snuggled with her puppy, making certain her baby was warm, cozy and comfortable.

Dony had been the only puppy in the litter that appeared to be healthy – she was lively and a good eater. However, none of her siblings survived, and we were very concerned that Dony also would succumb to death. After all, her mother had been an emaciated stray in a rural community, darted and almost paralyzed by Animal Control, had advanced heartworm disease and had been vaccinated and inoculated – all before any of her vets knew she was pregnant. She had been on many different medications as well, and my husband and I wondered how Dony could possibly turn out to be healthy. We anticipated all sorts of potential disabilities and health issues she might face. We were afraid that she would be ill, frail, blind or deaf or have various congenital defects.

We had never had a dog that had given birth to puppies before – we had early on been taught to spay and neuter. We provided the very best care we possibly could on the advice of several of our vets, but this was a brand new and remarkable experience for us. We tried to anticipate Kianna and Dony's every possible need. Our beautiful Malamute mix, Caesar, was at the end stage of osteosarcoma (bone cancer), we had just lost eight of nine puppies rushing them to the animal ER, Kianna was frail and exhausted and must have been devastated by watching so many of her babies die. She tried so very hard to keep them breathing, but she simply couldn't – it was such a stressful time for all of us. However, our beloved little Dony continued to inhale and exhale and drink her mother's milk and digest the food we'd been advised by the vet to provide. We supplemented Kianna's milk with formula which we would bottle-feed Dony. Caesar had been an integral part of the birth of Kianna's puppies. He lived to see them live and die. He acted as Kianna's partner and helped her care for tiny Dony. Their relationship was so moving. Caesar constantly licked Kianna and the baby. Kianna alternated between licking Caesar, putting her head on his shoulder and licking her new baby.

On December 28, 1998, Caesar finally succumbed to cancer. We were devastated by his loss. but we were so happy that he and Kianna had come to know, love and trust each other. Kianna would raise Dony by herself but of course, with our help and assistance. Our friends, Betty and Chris had created a huge “whelping” box designed to

accommodate Kianna along with her eight or nine puppies. The whelping box was gorgeous, hand-made by Chris with beautiful craftsmanship. It lay on the floor at the bottom of our bed in the master bedroom. It was huge, and neither Dony nor Kianna had any interest in using it at all. So it remained completely empty while Kianna and Dony snuggled in their blankets and on soft pillows in a quiet, comfortable corner of the room closest to where Norm and I slept. Mother and daughter were deeply attached to each other and inseparable. Kianna was the best mother anyone could hope for – attentive, responsive, adoring, affectionate, demonstrative, playful. It was with enormous admiration and respect that I observed her tenderly care for the newborn. With the passage of time, the puppy was becoming very well socialized by her mother as well as by her human friends and family members.

Everyone who visited Dony thought her to be one of the most beautiful puppies they had ever seen. However, we were very worried that she still hadn't opened her eyes at two weeks of age. Other dog owners and pet experts assured us that this was "normal", but we waited with bated breath for her eyes to open and for her to see us.

On the seventeenth day of her life, Dony's beautiful golden brown eyes opened, and we knew she could see. We were so profoundly grateful for this gift of sight for our little girl that had survived so much trauma during her time in her Mama's belly. Not only could Dony see, but also she could hear and she was pronounced by our vet to be healthy in every way. She was perfect!

Throughout their lives together, Dony and Kianna were devoted and inseparable. Kianna taught Dony to hunt squirrels and other rodents, to catch our ducks, to play with the other dogs, to assume the role and assert the power of "princess" among the other canines, and to rule as an alpha female. Their love and affection for one another were unparalleled. I know that when Kianna was diagnosed with synovial cell sarcoma and given a short time to live, Dony knew and seemingly understood completely that her mother would not be with her much longer. She never left her mother's side. Kianna died in our back yard with Dony by her side on February 20, 2005. Dony did not overtly grieve. She seemed to grasp and accept the natural course of events and to make her kind of peace with the universe.

In a few days, we will be celebrating Dony's twelfth birthday – on Christmas Day, December 25, 2010. Dony is beautiful, brilliant, charming and extremely intelligent. She is also very gentle and reserved. She became certified as an Animal Assisted Therapy Dog many years ago and has brought healing and joy to many people in hospitals, nursing homes and assisted living centers. She is a constant source of beauty, love and joy for my husband and me. She is – and always will be – our very special Christmas gift...