
LINES FROM LINDA

FAMILY, FRIENDS & AKC SPORTS

JOY FOR JEFF HILLMAN

BY LINDA AYERS TURNER KNORR



Right in the middle of a Hallmark Christmas in July movie, I received a telephone call from my friend Kris Harner. Kris is the Cluster Chairman for the Carolina Foothills Classic Dog Shows and Show Chairman for the Greenville Kennel Club. Since I was scheduled to judge their upcoming Pee Wee event, she said she had a special request: Would I agree to allow Jeff Hillman, a grown man, to participate?

The Pee Wee Special Attraction is a pre-Junior Showmanship class for youngsters between five and nine years old and their canines over four months of age. Each unit includes the child, their parent/guardian/responsible adult, and their dog. Youth get to exhibit their dog one at a time, giving them the opportunity to enjoy the thrill of Conformation. Crowds are drawn to watch, and applause is abundant.

Jeff Hillman came from a military family, growing up on Long Island, New York. He has special needs that were not being properly cared for when his sister, Jan Plant, and her husband, Scott, stepped in and brought Jeff to their home in Upstate New York to be a part of their family.



L/R: Linda Ayers Turner Knorr, Jeff Hillman, Doug Ljungren, Jan Plank, Todd Turner, Gloria Askins, and Judy Cheshire

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Jeff Hillman and AKC Executive Vice President of Sports & Events, Doug Ljungren

Recently, the family had moved to a big property in Tennessee. Since moving in with Jan and Scott, Jeff has thrived! He lost 50 pounds, developed an outgoing personality, and developed interests in woodworking, crafts, and mostly Jan's family of dogs. Most of the dogs have multiple AKC titles, including champions of records in Conformation and Agility.

When Jeff's service dog developed cancer, Jan reached out to Toni Richmond who, along with Leslie Stoffels, had a litter of Afghan Hound puppies out of BIS SBIS GCH Singh Nazira Some Enchanted Evening, bred to CH Sharia Sunset. There was one puppy that was destined to become Jeff's future service dog. The puppy is "Whitney," Sing Shekinah Waiting to Exhale. She has developed a tight bond with Jeff, as well as with the rest of the family! If accepted, her debut with Jeff would be in the Pee Wee Class in Greenville, South Carolina.

Having entered the show ring myself in the regular Conformation competition at age six, I have a HUGE soft spot in my heart for our young stars of tomorrow and AKC's Pee Wee Class!

Kris and I were both experiencing chills of excitement to welcome Jeff Hillman to be a part of our upcoming dog show!



photo courtesy of Bryan McNabb Photography



Kris Harner, GKC Show Chair, Judge Linda Ayers Turner Knorr, and Jeanette Stribling, GKC President, celebrate the occasion with Jeff and 'Whitney.'

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When the time would come to enter the ring, Jeff and Whitney would be accompanied by two exceptional people, Jeff's sister, Jan Plank, and their friend, Cameron Capozzi, both of whom are fine examples of what AKC sports are all about. Cameron is the son of AKC Judges and AKC Delegates Michael and Marla Capozzi. Michael and Jeff became friends when Jeff came to live with the Planks. Jan and Cameron's mother had co-bred Afghan Hounds for many years. Jeff started going to shows with them and his love for the dogs was obvious. Marla decided to start a class for Jeff at their specialty cluster. The three clubs embraced her idea, as have other specialty clubs around the country.

Cameron expressed to me, "Being a third-generation dog show person, I am happy to help Jeff know that feeling of 'three minutes in the sun' with his dog! I love dogs, even having done my Eagle Scout project for the Guide Dog Foundation on Long Island. I just started my second-year Pre-Med studies at Lipscomb University with hopes of attending Vanderbilt University Medical School."

With AKC's Mark Desrosiers and an enthusiastic group of fans clapping, and without any hesitation, Jeff and Whitney sailed around the ring completing each task to perfection. For me and for others, it was hard to hold back the tears, but the joy expressed on Jeff's face was exhilarating!



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Cameron Capozzi, friend and mentor to Jeff, with me.



The following day, when time permitted for a quality visit, Doug Ljungren, AKC Executive Vice President for Sports and Events, wanted to spend time to get to know and encourage Jeff. Judy Cheshire, Greenville Kennel Club AKC Delegate Gloria Askins, and my son, Todd Turner, joined me for the introductions. Of course, Jan and Cameron were present to bring out Whitney for this very special occasion.

Following a meaningful time of fun and sharing, Doug Ljungren had these comments:

“Dogs bring motivation and happiness that enrich our lives. It is a joy to see the transformation this has brought to Jeff and his family. The outpouring of support for Jeff and his dog Whitney demonstrates the inviting and encouraging attitude of AKC dog sport participants. Congratulations to the Greenville Kennel Club for providing him this opportunity.”

Participating in any sport should be about how it makes us feel. Our mission and values should guide us for a common purpose. During this holy season, let each of us be a bright light and bring JOY to someone’s life. MERRY CHRISTMAS, HAPPY HANUKKAH, and HAPPY KWANZAA! ■