

# Chicago Tribune

## Healing hands lead the way

By Dawn Turner Trice

Burleigh is a Bernese mountain dog who is more mountain than dog. At 120 pounds, the 16-month-old bounds into the examining room at a Des Plaines doggy fitness center like an animal a quarter of his size.

Burleigh is Katie Mehrtens' youngest client and has only been with her for about three months. But he knows the drill. He sniffs around for a bit before making his way to a pallet to lie down on his stomach.

Although it appears that Mehrtens is just petting Burleigh, she's actually feeling for muscle knots and spasms, and dry spots on his coat, which might suggest poor circulation. She works with him for about an hour, stretching his body and checking his range of motion in his limbs and neck.

"He's growing so rapidly, and because he's a show dog, (his owner) wants to make sure his muscles are loose enough to keep up with his growth," Mehrtens told me during a recent visit. "She doesn't want him to get injured."

Mehrtens is well aware that some people might dismiss pet massage as a New Age extravagance. But she said it often works on animals the same way it works on humans. It helps animals relax while alleviating stiffness, soreness, anxiety and fear.

So this could just be a story about a pet masseuse and an incredibly cute dog that seems to purr like a kitten—sorry, Burleigh—when gently stroked. But it's also a story about healing in a much larger sense.

Here's what I mean: Over the years, Mehrtens, 44, has battled diabetes, lost most of her vision, had two pancreas transplants and suffered two broken legs in a sky diving accident.

"One of the things I learned when I lost my vision—and I was in a pretty rotten state emotionally—is that I didn't want my disability to define me," said Mehrtens, of Skokie.

"It came down to this: I can move on and learn to live with this and do the best I can. Or I can sit at home and be sad all the time, and that wasn't so appealing."

Mehrtens was diagnosed with diabetes when she was a toddler. In 1998, when she was 30 and working as a special education teacher, she lost most of her sight as a result of her disease. Legally blind, she has no vision in her right eye and a sort of pinhole vision in her left.

"I took a two-year medical leave from teaching," she said. "I always say it was to learn how to be a good blind person."

In 2000, she wanted to live on her own, so she got a guide dog, a yellow Lab named Fairway. Five years later, Fairway was diagnosed



**Katie Mehrtens, a certified pet massage therapist who is legally blind, works with Burleigh, a 16-month-old Bernese mountain dog.**

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with a blood disease that her vet said would take the dog's life.

Mehrtens said that Fairway's treatment, which combined traditional and alternative veterinary medicine, introduced her to the holistic aspect of dog care.

"A friend said I should try acupuncture," Mehrtens said. "I went to see a veterinary acupuncturist, and she said she could help Fairway" and that her illness wasn't fatal.

It took about six months, but Fairway's condition began to turn around.

As Fairway regained her health, Mehrtens continued to teach and went on medical leave for a pancreas transplant, her second. She wound up

rejecting the organ. But her recovery gave her time to contemplate her future and teaching.

Then Mehrtens decided to mark turning 40 by sky diving. The first jump went well. But the second ended in a freak accident in which she broke both of her legs. She had six surgeries and a yearlong recovery that gave her more time to think about her future.

"I loved, loved, loved the kids, and I still love teaching," she said. "But some of the aspects (of being an educator) weren't fitting anymore, and I didn't want to be a teacher who was unhappy."

She felt she had helped many of her students—they had severe physical and cognitive delays—see their potential, and it was time to move on.

By then, Fairway had decided to retire. "We went for a walk one day, and she just stopped in the street," Mehrtens said.

They found themselves embarking on a new chapter in their lives.

"I thought: 'My God. Wouldn't it be the coolest thing in the world to be a pet masseuse?'" she said. "You get to be with animals all day."

She went back to school, and now she's doing her thing.

She said the client she's had the longest is Sasha, a 6-year-old, blind basset hound. When Mehrtens started working with her, Sasha had just had back surgery because of a spinal injury that left her paralyzed. She's now walking.

"We can relate," Mehrtens said. "It's always so rewarding when you start out with a dog that has a lot of medical issues, and you can help them. At first she would see me and be on guard. But after about three months, she finally laid flat on her side and relaxed."

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