

Mr. McGillicuddy

Who Rescued Who?



Written by:

TODD NELSON

Inspired by: Gilly

Mr. McGillicuddy- Who Rescued Who?

Foreword-

To be honest, this story was never meant for the public. It all started as my own journal-therapy to help me cope with my grief during Gilly and my final days together. What was happening to me? Why was I so devastated? I was tired of running. Rather than bury these feelings deep inside as I had for the past 20 years, I chose to hunt them down and confront them. During the journey I learned that I was more emotionally injured than I knew, and this 14-pound ball of fur had landed in my lap and rescued me.

But why stop there? Could our story help others too? Maybe this is bigger than just the two of us? Let's find out! I invite you to pause reality for just a moment and join me in this roller-coaster ride of a story. Who knows? Gilly may just have something for you, too.

Acknowledgements-

To my wife, Sarah- I could not have asked for a better life partner. I can never repay you for your support through this chapter, and so many more like it.

To family and friends- Thank you for being my sounding board as I worked through my grief. I do not know how I would have done it without you.

And finally

To my best friend, Gilly. There is no way to repay you for what you did for me. I did the best I could while you were here, and hope to continue to do so by sharing this story with the world. Rest in peace, buddy. I look forward to seeing you again soon.

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Serendipity Strikes- The Day I Met Gilly

I still remember when I first laid eyes on Gilly at a pet fair in downtown San Antonio. The date was 10 October, 2010. 10/10/10. Based on the date alone, it was bound to be a special day but it was destined to be even more significant than that. It was going to be the day that I met my best friend, Gilly.

Have you ever looked back on earlier chapters of your life and asked yourself how you even survived? At the time you did not realize how difficult it was, but it absolutely was? This was one of those times.

My name is Todd Nelson and at the time I was a 38-year-old Caucasian male recently separated from 20 years of military service. For the last 10 years I had been in and out of two combat zones where I was able to witness firsthand two countries torn down by war. Beautiful buildings reduced to rubble, poverty as far as the eye could see, and fear, anger, and resentment, in every face you looked into. My own life was little different. During the last seven years alone, I had gone through a bitter divorce of 12 years, been physically separated from my two beautiful daughters, been critically injured by a suicide bomb, and my military career had been cut short just when it was getting rewarding after 20 years. Aside from my miraculous marriage to Sarah, everything that I had planned on in life had been taken from me, against my will. My life was more than just a blank canvas, it was a crater. I could not tell at the time but my heart had been reduced to a void, looking to be filled.

It was a blistering hot day in San Antonio and Sarah was out of town for work. I was bored, driving the streets looking for something to occupy some time before I went home. Off in the distance a splash of color caught my eye, and I drove over to investigate. When I got closer, I saw signs that it was a dog adoption event in the parking lot of a Petco. It would be the perfect distraction I was looking for. I had never been to a pet fair and had no idea what to expect. I had never seriously considered adopting a dog. We already had a cat, and that seemed like plenty of responsibility at the time. I parked the car and

admired the variety of pups for adoption in the temporary playpens for dogs. There were dogs of every shape and size, most of them laid out flat trying to get relief from the oppressive heat. And then I saw him. I still remember it like it was yesterday. He was just a little guy, with his bright silver hair in a buzz cut and allllll legs. He was so small! Not even tall enough to reach the top of the metal enclosure while standing on his hind legs. Compared to the other dogs he was full of life, looking intently at all that was going on around him.

A Heart Ignited

Casually, I introduced myself to the gal sitting by him. She told me her name was Jo Ellen and I inquired for this little guy's story. She told me his name was Gilly. Based on his adorable head and dense, flowing coat he was Shih Tzu, and based on his long torso, legs and tail- he was part Schnauzer. She joked when she said, "that makes him a shit-zer". We had a good laugh. He was starting to grow on me and I didn't know anything about him. She told me the vet said he was maybe 2 to 3 years old and he had been abandoned on the streets of San Antonio. When he was found six weeks earlier on the 21st of August, he was emaciated, hostile and his hair was hanging over his face from months or maybe even years of neglect of not being groomed. That was the day he was turned into the shelter, narrowly escaping death. The fact he had survived that far was a miracle, and his story was just beginning.

The shelter took a pair of scissors to his brow just to clear the hair out of his eyes and began the week-long adoption attempt. She explained that during that week, the shelter starts all dogs on the top shelf. Every couple of days, they euthanize those on the bottom row that were not adopted the 2 days before and then move the rest of the dogs down one. She went on to explain this is because the lower the shelf, the higher the chances of adoption as small children can get closer and convince their parents to adopt.


5201

San Antonio
Animal Care Services
Kennel Card

ASCS
8/21/10
1187

Animal ID:
A133572

Hold/Notify?



Name:
UNKNOWN

Color: **BLACK & WHITE** Markings:

Breed: *Schnauzer*
ENG-TOY-SPANIEL

Sex: **MALE** Age: **4 YRS**

Collar Color: Collar Type: Tag: *None 10/21/10*

Intake Date: **8/21/2010** Release Date: **8/26/2010** Intake By: **MR87**

Intake Type: **STRAY / NIGHT** Owner Surrender Reason:

Found @ / Comments:
9526 GILLCROSSING

Disp.	Date	Time	Sed.	Euth	Initials

Gilly checked in to the Humane Society

The story grew more interesting when she explained that she was a Great Dane rescuer, and on that day, the 28th of August, she had only gone in looking for any of those giant dogs. For some reason, beyond her understanding that tiny, mangy mutt caught her eye there on the bottom shelf and captured her heart. His window of opportunity to live was closing fast. In fact, she may have been the last person to see him before he would be carted away for good. What a shame that would have been for the world. Somehow, she saw potential through that cloud of matted hair when no one else could. She agreed to make this one exception and rescue him from being laid down. If only she knew the chain of events that she put in motion that day with that choice. I can only imagine how awkward it must have been to bring that 12-pound dog home amongst the giants she was used to. Regardless, she went to work. Over the next 5 weeks she nursed him back to health. She gave him a buzz cut to remove the matts, and ensured the giant dogs around him left him enough to eat. By that day on the 10th of October, he got a clean bill of health which brought her to this fair in hopes of finding him a forever home.



The day our souls connected

When I heard his story, subconsciously I saw a mirror of my own life and it hit my heart like a brick. Like me, his nature was love, and all he got in return was neglect, abuse, and abandon. I could feel the grief, sorrow, and despair that I had felt over the past 7-years manifest in him, and it burned me up. I was blind-sided by new emotions. I felt a calling to save. I felt energy surging back through me that I had not felt for years. It was just what the doctor ordered.

As strong as my feelings were, I felt that Sarah deserved a say in the matter before I committed, so I asked Jo Ellen if she would mind holding onto him until she got back in a couple of days. Next, I called Sarah to read her in and she graciously agreed to meet him when she got home. My guess is although she was thousands of miles away, she heard an energy in me she had not heard for years. We could both tell this was going to be important for me. We had no idea how much.

Before we hung up, I told her all about him. When I told her how old he was she brightened. She pointed out if they were right, then

that would give him a birthdate around my Alive Day, 28 August 2007, the day I survived that bomb blast. We could just make that his birthdate too. The serendipity grew undeniable. I was destined to be this little guy's champion.

Adoption- My Next Mission Begins

I still remember driving Sarah over to meet him. Jo Ellen and I agreed to meet in front of a strip mall in the Legacy Shopping Center. As promised, there she was, parked under some live oak trees. I remember introducing Sarah to Jo Ellen, and then to Gilly. As predicted, she said OK. My heart soared!

Getting Comfortable

I took him home and went to work making him comfortable. This guy was going to have an amazing life! One of the first orders of business was to get him a proper haircut. He looked like a fluffy angel!



Diamond in the Rough

Big eyes, big head, puffy tail, and an expression of an angel. Next, he needed a proper seat for the car because I knew we would be going on a lot of drives together. At the home front, we were blessed with a good half acre lot where he could explore during the days. I was taking college classes at the time, so would need to leave him at home while I was gone, but wanted a place for him to relax so I built a makeshift doghouse out of scrap wood. When we screened in the patio, I had the installer frame in a premium dog door just for him but realized it was too far from the ground on the outside so I built him what we called “Gilly Steps.” They were small enough to fit inside a bucket but I was so excited to provide for this dog I engineered it so it could hold an elephant. I even included a handrail. When I bragged about it most of my friend’s made fun of me that I loved this dog too much. For that, they were right. I would spare no expense for this little guy. I would give my life for him.

Setting The Foundation

Sarah recommended we enroll Gilly in obedience training so off we went to PetSmart. I admit my expectation was we would learn how to do tricks. In truth, Gilly did not learn anything. Instead, they taught ME how to communicate with HIM so he could understand me. Body language, tone and consistency were key. I took everything they said as gospel and often got teased by family and friends on how I talked to him. It didn’t even phase me. It was our special sauce only he and I shared. I will always be grateful for that class. It brought our relationship to new heights.

Establishing Order

I also purchased an invisible fence just in case he got tempted to try to get out between the fence pickets of the backyard. I recall one day it was brought to my attention somehow that he was out in front of the house without permission. The little bugger circumvented the invisible fence and was wandering without supervision. I recall going out front seeing him up ahead and calling to him to come back. This was very early in our relationship so I had not established a pecking

order or dominance so he did not respond. In fact, as I walked up to him, he would walk away, almost as if he was testing me. That little booger! Does he have no appreciation for what he has here? My temper flared. I would get close to him and he would turn and jog away from me. I would get back close to him and he would repeat. My fury grew out of control as I approached five houses, seven houses, ten houses away and he still repeated this repeatedly. Eventually we reached the corner of the neighborhood. He jogged left. I cut him off. He would jog right I cut him off again. Closer and closer to the corner we went. There was nowhere left to go. I snapped him up. I was so mad! I started stomping home as fast as I could, shouting expletives at him. Admonishing him. I did not even care that I didn't have a good hold on him. In my fury I did not care that I was holding him upside down! He did not fight back, which was good for him because I was ready for a fight! 10 houses back to the house and I just got angrier and angrier on the way. I yanked the side gate open and carried him to the invisible fence. All the way home all I could think of is how close he was to being lost again and it scared me to death. By the time we got home I had made the decision to get the lesson to stay away from the fence over with, once and for all. We walked to and from the fence 3 times so he could feel the shock before I let him down and we went separate ways to cool down. That was the last time we fought. He never tested me again. In fact, I never had to go looking for him again. From that point



Loved

forward, he never left my side. We did more than just learn about a fence that day. I had demonstrated my commitment to him and he reciprocated with his loyalty to me. It was the day we cemented our relationship.

From that moment on, we were like peas and carrots. He looked at me in a whole new way. His dedication continued to grow as I continued to demonstrate he could trust me. He knew he was safe when I was around.

Let The Good Times Roll!

Now that our relationship was on solid ground, we became inseparable. For the next 12 months, I found my stride in my new mission. During those months if I was not in college classes or golfing, we were together. Every morning, we would go for a 2-mile jog together, and every afternoon we would go for a walk together. He blessed every neighbor he met. When they would ask his name, I would always answer dryly, “Well the name on his driver’s license is Mr. McGillicuddy, but his friends just call him Gilly.” It was always a hoot to watch them see through the dry humor and realize he did not actually have a driver’s license. But they never forgot his name!

If we were not doing any of these things he was in the car with me going to the hardware store,



Super-Gilly!

or the park.



Gilly and Nature Collide

I even ordered him a special back-pack so he could go with me on bike rides!



Gilly and Daddy out for a ride

Every time we would walk in the house, he would tear off to the living room to find a toy to play with. “Mr. Ele-pant”, “Santa Paws”, and “Lammey” were just a few. He loved the small toys with easy squeakers. He would pretend it was hard to find the squeaker (knowing exactly where it was!). He never caught on to the idea of playing fetch. Instead, he made ME chase HIM. Perhaps he was the

smarter one?⁹ I griped, but we had fun nonetheless. Even if he didn't have a toy, he loved it when I would chase him around the couch and dinner table!



Gilly with his best friend,

I do not think there was a single weekend we didn't go on at least one adventure together. Almost every weekend we would make at least one trip to the hardware store, but on some weekends, we would go for a walk through a park. I was all-in. Committed to repaying for all the wrong that had been done to him. Never taking a day for granted.

In between all these events when I was at home, you could count on one thing- wherever I was, he was with me. As Sarah always said- he was like my shadow. Whenever I looked back, he would be standing there. It got so that I started putting dog beds everywhere I went. In the kitchen. In the office. In the shed. I enjoyed having him with me and he with me, and I wanted him to be comfortable.

Gilly Gives Back- Who Rescued Who?

I was so focused on providing for him, I had not noticed what he was doing to me. This dog that I was not even looking for had become an extension of my life. I set out to save HIM from this world and without knowing it, he saved ME. Saved me from the loss of purpose.



That is when I first heard the saying “who rescued who?” and it hit me. I started realizing for the first time how much he was doing for me. Without even knowing it, I was being blessed seven times seventy. Just when I did not think I could love him more. Next chance I got, I ordered a magnetic sticker and place it on my car (something I NEVER do). Shortly after, in 2014, I chose to paint him a

food dish in a ceramic painting class Sarah and I signed up for. I painted it gray to match his fur, with paw prints in the bottom around his name in bold, “GILLY” and a big, “Mr. McGillicuddy” all around the outside. If he was not with me, he was on my mind. He had his paw wrapped around my heart for sure.

Gilly Gives Back- I Want To Be More Like Gilly-

I had one more revelation. Every day, I did at least one thing that he did not like. Sometimes I would accidentally step on him. Grooming always took him way past his patience. I was the one that took him to the dreaded vet, and there were few days he would not get mad because I would leave him at home alone. But he never held a grudge. No matter what I did, he always came back to me as if it never happened. What a pure heart. It was then that I coined the phrase, “I want to be more like Gilly.” It became the new standard that he has set in my life.

Repairing A Broken Heart

It was not all rainbows and sunshine. Because of the physical trauma in his past, he had a fear of strangers. When we first got him, he would growl and bare his teeth and it scared us. My heart ached for him. He was not made to feel this way about people. I was going to save him from this too. My plan was to do this at the hardware store. I was there every week anyway, and he was always with me, so might as well put it to use. There was no food so there was no rule against it. We started very cautiously, ensuring no one got too close. As time went by, people would ask if they could pet him. I would hold him tight, and ask them to move slow.

It worked! He got approached at least once every trip. Gradually I could relax my grip on him. Eventually, he started to lean toward people looking for attention. He was back, the dog he was always meant to be. The dog that would go on to bless hundreds if not thousands of people he would come across in his years to come.



In His Happy Place

Back To Work- A Difficult Decision

By November of the following year of adopting him, about one year later, my college degree was concluding, my body hurt from all the golf, and I was ready to get back into a regular job. By God's grace, I landed a position at a prominent company in town. I remember the hardest part of accepting that position was the fact that I would have to leave Gilly alone. My commitment to him conflicted with my need to go back to work. I had to find a way to accomplish both. Was there

a way? I struggled and I prayed over it. My original goal was to go back to work for five years. I recall being on an evening walk, walking past the sage bushes at the end of our driveway and thinking “this is it. When I finish this chapter, he will be in his golden years. He will not be young anymore,” and I realize now, I was right. I was full of grief. I felt like I was abandoning him. The only way I could keep my promise to him and go back to work was by making him a promise. I solemnly promised him that no matter what happened. I would take him for a walk twice a day, every day, no matter what for the rest of his life. I promised him I would never miss a day. I looked back now, 9000+ walks and 150 months later, and I can honestly say I kept that promise. I remember days where I worked outside to the point of endangering my health. Heat exhaustion, heat cramps, and on one occasion probably on the brink of heat stroke. I would lay down to recover and even then, as my heart raced from recovery, we suited up and we went for a walk. It may have been short on those days, but I kept that promise.

Back To Work- Another Difficult Decision

Those first 5 years flew by in a flash. I had kept my commitment to Gilly, and I had achieved my objective at work, but I needed to decide with what to do next. At first, I toyed with the idea of coming home and being a full-time dad again, but I knew that was not the right thing for us all. So, I refreshed my commitment to Gilly, and committed to another round of work. I went through the same turmoil, but this time knowing he would not be with us by the time I was done. It was even more painful this time, but for the betterment of the family I made that commitment, and he graciously went along. Every day I would leave, I would roll down the car window and I would hear him barking. He was, "barking mad" when I left every single day up to the end. No doubt about it. But every day, when I got home, he did not sulk. He did not hold it against me. He jumped up to greet me with all the enthusiasm he had in him. I did my best to keep my commitment to him with two daily walks and bringing him with me on adventures on the weekends. When we had to leave town, we were blessed with wonderful friends to babysit him. Craig,

MaryAnne, Regina and Wayne— there is a special place in our hearts for you. Thank you is not enough for the peace you gave us when we could not be together. But without fail, every time I returned, he welcomed me back with a wagging tail.

Covid- Bonus Round!

Although Covid was difficult for us people, it was an answer to Gilly and my prayers! Out of the blue, and beyond our control we suddenly were back 100%. Did dad spend a lot of time in the office? Sure! But he put a comfy bed 3 feet behind him and we were together again at last. It was like a bonus round from our prayers!

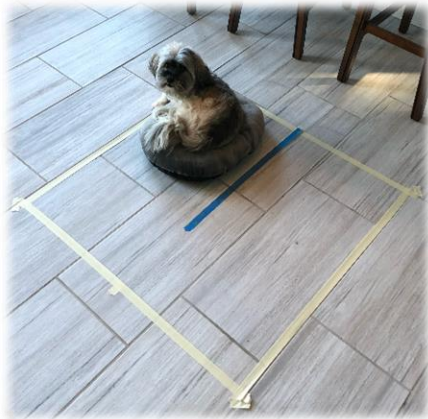
Covid did present us with a challenge. Dog grooming was not considered an essential service, and Gilly's coat did not slow down. I put it off as long as I could, but still no grooming help was available. Without knowing a thing, I went to buy clippers. I knew nothing about them, or how long I would need them so I ordered entry level clippers on Amazon. I set up a grooming station on a party cart on the back deck, hooked him to a safety pole and I went to work. I had no idea what I was doing, so it was painfully slow. His coat was so thick! My entry-level clipper took 5 attempts to make every cut. He hated his front feet touched and his head groomed the most. We would get half way through a cut and we would all have to take a break. The next time it took a few breaks. Eventually we could not take enough breaks and things got ugly. He started to get frustrated, baring his teeth and snapping at me. I yelled. We were both so frustrated. I had to do something. We would always hug and make up, but we needed help.

The first thing I did was call my vet clinic and ask if there was anything they could give me to calm him down so I could take care of him. They surprised me with the answer when they informed me, they just hired a groomer to work there. Saved by the bell! The Daddy-Gilly war was officially over. We set up time for the doctor to assess Gilly for a "chill-dog-cocktail" and a new chapter was started. The night before a haircut, he got 3 special cheese treats, each with a

small cut of over-the-counter medicines that cause drowsiness. It took us a few visits to get the dosage right, but once we did, it worked like a charm. He was so chill! He would not have a care in the world going in. Mia was his groomer and she always did a fabulous job. I was especially grateful, now that I knew what it took to do the job. We went in every 6 weeks originally, but when I noticed he got lethargic when his coat grew in, I reduced it to every 4 weeks. Together, we had conquered Covid!

Gilly In The Dog House

During Covid, Gilly's sister Missy the cat began to lose her health which meant could not control her bladder and begin to leave a mess in the living room. Gilly, being the dog he is, felt compelled to cover it with his own scent. He is a dog, right? Well, Sarah never caught Missy doing it, but she certainly caught Gilly doing it. Missy was laughing behind his back. This set off a chain of events that made us realize he was doing the same thing elsewhere. We finally realized that during the time before we adopted him, he had not been house trained. As mad as I wanted to be, I realized he was the victim, not the villain. I was going to find a way to save this. I was stumped. I started asking around. One day when I was out of ideas, I was lamenting to my neighbor, Ed (rest in peace, Ed), and he casually recommended a belly band. I had never heard of one. I did my research. Genius! I immediately ordered belly bands with disposable liners. Situation saved! From that point forward, Gilly wore a belly band whenever he had access to the house. At night, when he was in his bedroom, we took it off. During the day when I was away, I would place him



Gilly helping with his custom home design

outside where he did not need his, “pants.” There, he had access to the laundry room for air conditioning and a wonderful fenced in yard. There he had a grassy area to relieve himself, views of the street for entertainment, and a cozy dog hammock to catch some rays. I even built him a custom, over-engineered doghouse, built just for him, under the deck where he could be outside but still out of the elements.

The Golden Years

Eventually, when Covid ended, I had to go back to the office. Gratefully, we were allowed to transition slowly, which eased the separation anxiety. This time, we perfected our routine. Every day, rain, or shine, I would start off by waking him up, giving him a scratch and taking him outside for a morning pee. After breakfast, I would throw on his leash and his “jacket” (the harness so he did not choke when he insisted in saying, “HI!” to other people and their dogs), and take him for a good run or walk. No matter how fast I would go, He stayed with me, stride after stride. Never even panting. You could almost feel the zen coming off him as he plowed ever forward. Just as I left for work, I would give him fresh water, a crumbled-up treat (so he would not gulp it down!) and a loving reminder that “I’ll be back in 5 minutes”, making me feel better from leaving him knowing that is what it would feel like for him. Without fail, as soon as I got home from work, I would let him out of his room and take him for a quick pee. At dinner time he usually ate his biggest portion while we ate (he’s a social eater, Sarah!). After dinner I would put on his jacket and his leash and we would go for the second walk I promised him long ago. The final thing we would do every day is I would pick him up from the floor and cradle him in my arms by the back windows and rock him as we looked at the lights, then gently lay him to bed in his “bedroom” (the spacious cushioned wood crate he slept in).

2024- The Final Year

2024 began as a difficult year. At first, we noticed he was sleeping a lot. Not all at once but gradually over a few months. The bouncing off to the living room to play tug-of-war with his toys stopped.



Gilly getting tired

In February we noticed he stood like a zombie, as if laying down was uncomfortable. “Something’s wrong with your dog, Todd”, Sarah would say. “Oh, he’s just bein ’a dog!” I would say. I was already protecting myself from the grief that was soon to come.

The Last 30 Days

Things started to speed up at the beginning of May. First the groomer noticed he lost weight. He was down a full pound from his annual checkup in February. This is the equivalent of you or I dropping 20 pounds in 90 days, and he was lean to begin with. The vet and I agreed we would “keep an eye on it,” and went about our normal business. A few days later, on the 4th of May, during a routine light-hike with a friend, for the first time ever, he stopped dead in his

tracks half way up the hill. I picked him up until we were heading downhill again and he did fine. It was about this time when I suspected something might be wrong so I started to pay closer attention. I noticed his food dish was not going down so for a few days I measured it out to see how much he would eat and found he was eating an average of 1 serving every other day. By the 7th of May my concern grew so I took him into the vet to get labs. I was relieved to get news that all systems measured normal. The vet



I'm Tired, Dad

suggested we transition to wet food to get him more bang-for-his-buck per serving and I thought we were in the clear. For the next week I began to transition from dry food to wet. At first, he would eat it all every day, then he would eat around the kibbles. So, I reduced the kibbles to wet-only and he resumed eating again. On the third week of May, I dropped him off with "Aunt Gina," his favorite person (besides dad of course! Lol!) for a week of pampering while I left town. Every day, Gina would send me videos of his walks saying how good he was doing, but when I picked him up, she informed me although she had gone to the store to buy gourmet food, he had not eaten for a day or two and he stopped jumping up to say hello when she would come inside. She gently informed me these were the first symptoms when her dog passed recently. I can honestly say this was the point I started to get scared. The following week it got harder and harder to get him to eat and that weekend during his favorite trip to the hardware store he would not even sit up during the ride and laid down instead of stand up in the cart.

I grew from scared to panic. I began researching top morbidity reasons for his breed and learned it was due to heart failure. All the

signs added up so I made the first appointment I could with the vet. A couple of days later, we had a checkup.

With much dread, I brought him to see the doctor to get the bad news. We sat in that little room waiting for the doctor and I just held the shell of this dog, I once knew. When the doctor came in the room, I could barely hold myself together. The doctor must have seen it in my eyes because she took an empathetic tone immediately. "Let's put him up here and take a look. It took all I had but I put him on that table, and she immediately put a stethoscope to his heart. I could not look at her. "His heart sounds fine". What? My heart filled with joy. For a moment, I was in a state of euphoria. She palpated different parts of his body with no negative responses, and then we had a discussion. She informed me that she believed his appetite was due to a Gastro intestinal complication. As a temporary Band-Aid, she would prescribe appetite stimulants to get him to eat, but if we wanted to know the root cause she would be happy to perform an ultrasound and x-ray. I wanted to understand what was going on so I agreed to the procedure. I took them in the next day and sat by the phone hoping for good news. The phone call came in at 4 PM. "I found two masses inside of Gilly's liver. One is 4 cm. The other is 6 cm". "I'm happy to put in a consult to an oncologist to have them removed, but at his age, they're likely going to recommend against it. Outside of that my recommendation is we begin palliative care and we get his appetite up." I asked her his prognosis and she informed me that she has seen dogs last for months with this condition. she explained to me it was all risk management. Eventually, these masses would grow and cause one of two things. Gradual complications or sudden complications. If the later happens, it can be very traumatic to the owner. So, I would have to manage that risk and decide if I was willing to accept it. I thanked the doctor and immediately called Sarah. She listened empathetically and expressed her appreciation for the challenge. Of course she would support me in any way I needed.

Carefully she introduced the next challenge we would have. We were due to leave town for six days starting in a week. we would have to arrange care under these new circumstances. Would Regina be willing

to take this risk with us? If not, should we board him at the vet where we knew they would react appropriately? Was it worth locking him in a steel cage for a week while he was in palliative care? If not what then? Everything measured against one question- What would be the most comfortable option for him? The first thing I needed to do was to notify Gina so she could consider. After my first contact with Regina, she was unable to talk at the time, but we arranged a better time later that afternoon. When that time came, I laid it all out for her. I explained I was not trying to scare her and I was not trying to minimize the circumstances, but I felt she deserved to know all the facts so she could make an informed decision on what she was willing to do. I asked her not to decide because things could change. We both managed to avoid completely breaking down during that call because we both love him very much.

That next evening and morning were very difficult. The emergency food the doc gave upset his stomach and he was up all night (which meant I was too). When we woke, I gave him his appetite stimulant but did not seem to work all day like it should. I tried to walk him but he would not leave the house. He would plant his feet at the door and refuse to take another step. In desperation, I picked him up and carried him to the end of the street and to my surprise, he jogged back home! I had inadvertently tricked him into getting a few steps. With a cloud of despair in the air, to our surprise at dinner he gobbled down a bowl of food! I refilled his bowl, but was certain he would reject it. My hopes jumped. I refilled his bowl and went to get his leash. When I got back, I saw him eating again! When he was done, we headed for the door. I assumed I would have to carry him to the end of the street like that morning, but before I could pick him up, he was headed for the road! I had to jog to keep up! Not only did we do about 75% of the old route but we did it at a jog this time. My heart soared. We were going to beat this! We only stopped twice. Once at a neighbor's house where he always got a treat, and near the end when he started to slow down. I carried him for a minute until he got his wind back and we were back to jogging again. We jogged all the way home. I could only hope tomorrow he keeps it up.

Over his last several days the pattern was clear. He could only eat every other day. While he still would not play with his toys, jump up on the bed, or jump on my leg for attention, he would be able to go for a short walk and I even got him to squeak his toy one time. The second day was the hardest. He would not even get out of bed and it broke my heart. Then he would eat again and we would repeat. This felt like purgatory. Stuck in between. I was miserable. I lost my appetite. I did not want to wear colorful clothes. I had to decide for the following week while I travelled.

On that Saturday, 3 days before his final day, I was beside myself in agony that he was so lethargic from not eating. As I cried to Sarah, in my agony that if he would only eat, he would feel better, and in a last-ditch effort to give me comfort she fought her agony and started listing anything we had in the house to try to give him. “Tuna fish! Turkey chili from the freezer! Fajita steak and rice from the refrigerator!” Her newfound perspective was just in time. Just before I collapsed in despair I was inspired to try. It felt like I was in slow motion as I moved to the pantry and dug out a can of tuna. As if I was watching myself in slow motion, I poured the can into a bowl, put it down and held my breath. No dice. He sniffed it and walked away, like everything else. But the spiral of sorrow had been broken. Like a drill sergeant, Sarah went to the freezer and pulled out the turkey chili. “Heat this up!” she barked. As I moved to the microwave, she moved to the refrigerator to pull out the fajita beef and rice. As the turkey chili finished in the microwave, she gave me a piece of fajita meat to try with him. I knew it was a vain effort. He would never go for it, but to my surprise, he started chewing! He swallowed it! **NO WAY!** Sarah immediately turned to the knife drawer, pulled out a pair of kitchen scissors and chopping like mad. Both of us hoping against hope he would keep going. Eureka! Pay dirt! He let us feed one piece after another. We were so elated we just poured the entire thing into a dish and to our delight he started gobbling it down. Meanwhile, I began to pull the ground turkey out of the chili and filling a bowl. To our delight, he plowed it down! We were both emotionally exhausted. This had to be the hardest emotional rollercoaster in history.

I still held out for hope that he would pull through. If he did, I could think of three options. If his appetite came back, I could ask Gina to watch him. Maybe he would pack on the pounds! If she was uncomfortable, I could board him at the kennel and last resort would be to lay him to rest. If only his appetite would return! We kept to the plan for as long as we could before deciding, but his appetite never came back. He stayed in the good day/bad day cycle. On his last good day, in a desperate attempt to turn things around, we made a special trip to PetSmart to buy him the most bourgeoisie food we could find. While he did enjoy riding in the car, checking pee-mail and riding in the cart, by the ride home he was flagging. You could tell he was struggling, and this was on a good day. I needed help making the decision.

I could not do it. I thought I was strong enough. As well as I was at making logical decisions, I kept second guessing myself. Maybe I was mistaken? Maybe my formula is off. Maybe I missed something. I was in a never-ending loop.

Part 1- Carrying The Weight Alone

So, I did what came naturally, research. I found advice on line on how to make the difficult decision- inventory his top 3 favorite things. If he enjoys all 3- you are good. If he only enjoys 2- consider planning and if he only enjoys 1, well, you know. So, I did. Here were his most favorite things in order:

- 1- Follow me around the house
- 2- Ride in the car
- 3- Play captain through the hardware store
- 4- Go for walks
- 5- Play with his toys

By this time the only thing he had left was #1. By this method it was clear. It was time. I told myself these comforting thoughts-

I was able to see that all the future held going forward is he would either slowly lose the one thing he had left, or have a catastrophic failure, traumatizing all of us. Because of this, I was finally able to decide it was time. It was going to be difficult for me, but not to do so was failing him. I had spent our entire relationship proving he could trust me and I did not intend to fail him now. This would be my final gift to him.

Gilly's favorite thing to do is to be with me. Throughout his life I have had to make him do things he did not want to do. Stay home while I went to work. Go get his hair cut for example. Every time he may not have liked it but we had an agreement that if I decided it was in our best interest he would go along with. Every time I would do my best to make it as comfortable as possible. Treats before I go. Check pee mail before going into the doctor. This is another one of those times. He is headed for sickness. I need to protect him from that. I will make it as comfortable as I can doing the one thing, he loves the most- being as close to me as he can."

Logically I had it all figured out, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not make the decision. I could not decouple my own selfish interests over his needs. I was so frustrated. What is wrong with me?! So I sought counsel from friends. To my frustration the response was always the same. "Do what feels right." To no fault of their own, no one would take a side. It was all up to me, and I was stuck.

Part 2- "I Can't Do This Alone"

Unable to find an answer on my own I sought counsel from Sarah. She always has great perspective. I pleaded to her, "No matter how hard I try I cannot be objective about this. I cannot make this decision on my own. I am not strong enough. I need someone to help

me!” Although it was not her decision to make, she was willing to step into the confusion and helped me with the burden. When all others would give me vague answers, she calmly repeated the facts to me. “He’s not the same dog he was a month ago” and “Your dog left us a month ago”. She was willing to share the weight of this with me and I am forever grateful to have her in my life. With her help I was able to piece together a practical decision. That night, as we lay in bed, I made the decision to give him his final gift on Monday during his next scheduled follow up. None of us could keep this up. This was not fair to him, and it was not fair to us. I fell asleep thinking it was settled but when I woke that Sunday morning my heart was still not convinced.

Part 3- Finally Finding Peace

As much help as the internet, friends and Sarah were, there was still something important missing. It happened to be Sunday morning, his last final day and we headed to church in our usual routine. There during praise and worship I had a revelation. It was revealed to me as I cried during worship in church begging God to help me be at peace. This is what that small voice said to me. I walked out of church in complete peace.

The first question we ask when we suffer is why. I believe there is no waste in God’s economy. For those who read this story, I believe you will see the beauty in the story of Jesus, manifested right here in my life.

Before I continue, allow me to share a summary of my faith. When I reflect on the story of my savior, Jesus, I would tell the story this way: humanity, including the apostles, was on the brink of collapse. In love, God sent Jesus. Jesus selected his apostles and instructed them to give away all their things and follow him. And they did. Over the next several years, under the guidance of his Father, Jesus cared for his apostles. He mentored them, enjoyed them, and cared for them, listening to God all along the way to ensure he was doing His will and not his own. Eventually, Jesus was given a sign that he had done all he

could for his apostles here on earth. He listened to God, and God gave him the perfect moment to take the next step. I must believe he was scared and afraid on his way up the hill to the cross. Despite it all, Jesus selflessly allowed himself to be hurt so that the apostles could go forward to do even greater things for the world. He did it because he loved God, and he loved his apostles. As much as he did not want it, he knew through his relationship with God that it was the right thing to do.

As many of you know, I had experienced trauma myself before meeting Gilly. Because of Gilly, I now see how that trauma prepared me for this story. My past trauma taught me to trust in God and follow Jesus. I was blessed to be able to apply that to my entire life with Gilly. I have tried to raise Gilly emulating the story of Jesus.

Revelation- Gilly the Apostle

Like the apostles, Gilly was a wreck when I found him. Through no fault of his own, he had been rejected by the world twice, each resulting in a brush with death. First by being abandoned on the side of the road and second by facing euthanasia at animal control. God directed his path and mine to meet on that scorching hot day in downtown San Antonio. He put it on my heart that this soul was mine to care for, pure and simple.

With the lessons I learned from my own trauma, I have tried to follow Jesus' example with his apostles. For the next 13 1/2 years, I cared for Gilly the way Jesus cared for his apostles. By and large, we had great times, but we also faced the unpleasant moments together. Even though it broke my heart, we faced them together. When they occurred, I comforted him as much as possible, and like the apostles, he followed without question. It was through this relationship that I coined the phrase, "I want to be more like Gilly." Like the disciples, he followed me unquestionably, and like Jesus, even when it hurt, I followed God's will, all along giving him encouragement and praise.

Like Jesus saw signs near the end, over the past four weeks, I too have been seeing signs that it is time to take the next step. Like Jesus, I need to take the metaphorical spear in the side so that his soul can be free of its burden and be at peace. As sure as I am that Jesus was scared and sad, I am also scared and sad, but I know that the time has come. Waiting any longer will only result in additional discomfort. It is up to me to have the courage to willingly walk up that hill. Like our entire life together, I will take him through this unpleasant event with as much care and encouragement as possible, and I know he will follow me without question. Through my sacrifice, his burdens will end, and he will live in eternity in peace.



I hope all who read this will get the same message: It all makes sense now. My past traumas had a purpose: to learn to trust and follow Jesus. Following Jesus has made this journey a blessing. Because of it, I have no regrets. I do not know if I could say the same without him.

Please pray for my peace and comfort as I lay my friend to rest this evening. I will follow Jesus's example faithfully, and Gilly will do the same as the disciples. I am proud and blessed to have been able to model Jesus with his entire life.

Going Out On TOP!

With the decision made, the next morning I was finally able to think clearly for the first time in a week. I decided we would do it right. With 48 hours remaining I planned out the best two days of his life. It was Sunday, so I was free and as serendipity would have it, because he ate so well the night before, that day he would have at least a little energy. Besides just spending the day with him on the couch, I decided to take him for one last round of his favorite

activities- go to the pet store. There we would buy the most decadent dog food known to man. Being his good day, he stood



No Holds Barred

and looked out the window during the drive, he enjoyed checking pee-mail to his hearts content, and was able to stay alert all the way through the store. We picked out the 6 most excessive foods in the store, for cats and dogs. Spare no expense. At checkout, I asked if he could try one of their treats. Bonus- he ate it! She pointed it out and I grabbed a bag of that too. This was going to be GOOD! The ride home was as expected. With all that exertion, he began to flag, validating that we were still in the good day/bad day cycle. At dinner time, we pulled out all the good dishes, filled them all to the brim, and laid them out.

As expected, he smelled one, rejected it, and repeated with each dish. The best he could do was to lick the gravy from one of them, validating that no matter what we did, this cycle was as good as it was going to get. As it was still his good day, he was able to walk to the end of the street and back that evening but that was to be the end of his energy. No money or willpower was going to make it better. In fact, it was only going to decline. Our plan stayed valid.

The next morning was “the day.” As expected, since he would not eat the night before, so he had a, “bad day.” Blessedly, it was a work-from-home day, so we got to spend it together, yet he barely

had enough energy to follow me around the house. That day, to console my grief, I decided to compose an email to all those who love him and this memoir. The email took 2 hours before our walk. When



One Last Nap Together

I was done, to get him to walk I had to carry him to the end of the street and let him walk home on auto-pilot. The rest of the day I buried myself in this memoir to keep my mind busy. When I ran out of emotional energy, I took a break to watch a movie, but it did not help. I could not concentrate. I felt numb the entire time.

The only relief was the flood of responses to that morning's email. It validated what I had said- he had made an impact. All the responses helped me remember the good. They were the only bright spot in the day. For himself, he barely moved all day and the day seemed to get slower the closer we got. My stomach was churning, and my eyes were sore. There was nothing I could do. I could not walk him. I could not feed him, and he had only let me hold him for so long. The closer we got, the more our plan was validated.

His Final “Ride-In-The-Car”

Sarah pulled in with plenty of time to make our appointment. I had just finished this memoir, and was listening to it being read by a screen reader. As we got ready to go, I decided to put him in his jacket and leash for a special treat of checking pee-mail at the clinic. I held him on my lap on the way to the clinic, a treat he rarely, if ever

got. We left the window open so he could smell all the smells on the way there. He was so tired. Although I held him upright, he would not even lift his head to look out the window. I knew we did not have a minute to spare. He was ready for his final gift. When we arrived at the clinic, as planned, I took him over to where the other dogs go to relieve themselves so he could have one good smell. While I expected to be a wreck, I was surprised to find I was completely calm and at peace. They immediately had me put Gilly on the scale. No change to his weight. They then ushered us directly to the exam room. I was still at peace. I knew we were doing the right thing. After just a moment a technician asked for an update on his symptoms, we explained the good day/bad day cycle and she asked what we wanted to do. Knowing exactly what she meant I just nodded my head and said we were ready. She understood and she would be right back with Dr Thompson and some tissues. Tissues? I looked over and to my surprise, I saw a tear going down Sarah's face. In all my anguish, it never occurred to me she was in pain. She tried to tell the tech not to worry, but she came right back with the doc and the tissues, of which Sarah gracefully accepted. Dr Thompson was a different person that day. In previous visits she was very clinical. Low emotion. This time she was different. Her expression and tone were full of empathy. She confirmed his condition with us, and began to reassure us. She explained that we had done the right thing. She explained that the past few days trying the appetite stimulant were an important step. Even though she was pretty sure it would not work, no matter how difficult it was it was important that we tried. By doing so, we done right by him by exhausting all the options. At that point she explained the procedure. There would be a shot to relax him. Then they would take him back to start a catheter. Then they would bring him back. Then they would administer the same sedative they use to take X-rays or dental work. Then they would administer the final syringe to put him to sleep. She explained we could stay for as much, or little of it as we wanted, just to let her know. We nodded our heads and she left the room to prepare. Sarah and I sat in silence. Gilly laid in my lap, barely able to keep his head from drooping to the side. With one hand I stoked him. I watched his rib cage go up and down noticing how prominent his ribs were. I ran my fingers in between them

reminding myself of just how sick he was. I ran my fingers over his projecting hip bones, again thinking how terrible he must feel. Sarah ran her hands over his head and remarked she felt a bone she had never felt before. I reached over with my left hand and held hers. She dabbed her eyes and her chest heaved in grief. I was completely at peace.

Dr Thompson and the technician came back in and the tech asked if she could hold him while he got his first shot. I was about to stroke his head when doc was about to administer the shot and she said, “watch that hand dad.” I pulled away. She said sometimes pups will react to a shot and did not want my hand there. I watched for a sign of pain. Nothing. He was so tired. They handed him back to me and left us alone while the first shot went to work. I told Sarah that I had decided I would stay for the first shot but not the second. She nodded her agreement. We held hands while she cried. It was my turn to comfort her as she had done for me for the last month.

A few minutes later the door opened again. The technician explained it was time to take him back to get his catheter and she took him in her arms. He was so relaxed, just the way I wanted him.

A few minutes later, the door opened again. This time it was Mia, his hair groomer! It cheered me up to see her. She told us as soon as they found out about Gilly, she wanted to come share her respects. She said she adored Gilly and was sad to see him go. I expressed my deep appreciation for all she had done for us over the past few years and she left us again to ourselves.

A moment later the tech came back in the room holding Gilly. She handed him back to me and I placed him back on my lap. His chest was still rising and falling slowly, and I noticed his front foot had a black wrap with a red heart drawn on it. I think the tech had drawn it on there herself. She excused herself saying the doctor would be in momentarily.

The Final Moment

A moment later Dr Thompson and the tech came back in the room. This time Dr Thompson was holding three syringes and a towel. “This towel is if you want to hold him, he could pee on you.” Up to that point, I was not sure how far I would go, but at that moment I decided I was in all the way. I did not want him laying on a table when he fell asleep. I wanted him in my hands. Dr Thompson had me lift Gilly and she slid the towel underneath. I cradled his head in my hands as she crouched down before us. Sarah was crying beside me and Dr Thompson placed a hand on her leg as she comforted us. She told us what we were doing was the nicest gift we could give a dog. She told us a story of her mom suffering in a hospital near the end, and how frustrating it was to make her go all the way to the end. She explained this was a much better way to go, and we had done well. She inserted the first needle into the black wrap saying it was just a flash. She then inserted the second needle with the procedure-sedative, explaining its purpose. I continued to cradle Gilly’s head and stoke his body. She then donned her stethoscope and placed it to his chest. She said, “his heart is still beating, but he has stopped breathing, would you like to leave now, or stay to the end?” I already knew the answer. I was with him until the very end. I turned to Sarah and offered that she could leave if she wanted, but I was staying. Crying, she just shook her head. Dr Thompson nodded her head, and inserted the last needle through the wrap. I immediately noticed a change. Suddenly, his head felt heavy within my hand and his body went soft. Dr Thompson donned the stethoscope one more time, listened to two spots on his chest and said, “it’s done.” She inserted her hands under the towel, scooped up Gilly and cradled him in her arms. We stood, expressed our thanks, and all of us turned to leave the room, us through the front, them from the rear. It was done.

After we paid the bill, I grabbed his leash, collar and jacket and headed into the bright afternoon sun. Sarah had pulled herself together enough to drive so we loaded up in the truck and drove home. To my utter surprise, I was at peace. Although I had just said goodbye to my best friend I knew three things. We had given him a

long and peaceful life; he was now free of the burden of cancer and we had done everything humanly possible to make the ending the best it could be.

We did not know what we were going to do when we got home. Would we feel like clearing out his things, or would feel like leaving them in place until later? I do not think we ever decided. What we knew is we had to clean up all the food that he did not eat, and it just went from there. In the next 30 minutes all his things were cleared. As much as it hurt, we instinctively knew it was not going to get easier. Of all his things, the only thing we saved was his food dish. I found a plate holder, pulled out the step stool and propped it up proudly on our living room bookcase. There we will see the bold name, “GILLY” and it will remind us of all the good times he gave us.

The past month had all been about him. Now we could begin to grieve. To heal ourselves. We rest easy knowing he is resting peacefully, and when our hearts heal, they will be full of the life memories he gave to us.

“Tis better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all”

Epilogue- Gilly's legacy-

Gilly, you blessed everyone you have met. Strangers at the store. My teammates. My Friends. You blessed me with memories I would never have had without you. You gave me a mission, and you healed my heart. They say all dogs go to heaven, and you are certainly there. Rest in peace Gilly. Nothing can or ever will replace you. You made the world a better place because you were in it. You taught me what it looks like to love like there is no tomorrow. To "leave it all on the field" . You accomplished your mission beyond measure.

Your mission is accomplished. My mission is just beginning, with your example leading the way.



The Eyes of an Angel

Mr. McGillicuddy

Mr. McGillicuddy, Who Rescued Who? is a story of two torn lives inextricably wound together to make each whole. Experience the humor, frustration, joy, and sorrow as these two learn to lean on each other and make life meaningful after trauma.



About the Author: **Todd Nelson** has dedicated his life to the never-ending pursuit of resiliency. He continues to refine his perspective through his own adversity. Todd has been invited to hundreds of events to share his insights as a motivational speaker through www.inspiringsolider.com.