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Companion Best Friends

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Written by Jean Bartlett, February 2, 2020



Jean Bartlett 2016 photo

Nessie Digre, 2003-2020.

"Nessie was unconditional love," said retired RN Linda Pries. "Anybody that knew Nessie, never forgot her. I can't even count how many lives she touched at the Palo Alto VA Medical Center."

Linda, who retired seven and a half years ago, worked at the VA for 21 years. She worked as a chemotherapy nurse for 14 and a half years and then transferred to the Center's hospice unit where she worked until she retired. It was in the hospice unit that she first met Nessie. They became best buddies and remained so even after Linda's retirement. Nessie's owner and best friend, Pacifican Erick Digre, saw to it that every time he and Nessie headed to the Palo Alto VA to make their rounds, there was always a stop at their friend Linda's home for mutual must-have greetings. When Linda learned of Nessie's passing on Wednesday, January 29, she began emailing the sad news to Nessie's long list of friends. Like Nessie's immediate family members, Erick and Sue Digre, Linda said, "there will never be another Nessie."

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The first time I wrote a story on Nessie was not long after the devastating San Bruno Fire (pipeline explosion) in September of 2010. Her owner Erick – a watershed keeper for the City of San Francisco, a member of the San Francisco Disaster Medical Assistance Team, an EMT and a Red Cross volunteer – was out of town when the

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disaster struck. But when he arrived home two days later, he immediately headed over to help. He was working with the Red Cross and they had mental health professionals assisting the survivors.

"Look," he told them. "I've got my certified therapy dog with me in my vehicle, can you use her?" The answer was, yes.

Nessie knew instinctively who was most in need of her therapeutic skills.

"She stayed on her leash but she was like a pinball," Erick recalled. "She would go to a victim and they would pet her and hug her and I just let her lead. She visited everyone."



courtesy photo

Nessie and her guardian brother Scott Digre share a laugh in 2016.

* * *

Erick met Nessie in 2005. He had just returned home from working disaster relief in New Orleans following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, August of 2005, and realized he was in need of a dog that was just his. The father of four had always had dogs. He grew up with dogs. He and Sue and their kids had dogs and he loved the family's current dog, Tucker. But his time in New Orleans had been incredibly hard and he needed his own, special dog companion. "And Tucker was really my son Scott's dog." Two days later, Erick, Sue and Scott made a trek to a Border Collie farm in the Sacramento area to look at a dog up for adoption. According to the advertisement, the dog was not meeting the farm's Border Collie standards.

"She needed a home and I needed her," Erick said.

Yet he wasn't sure how it would work out with Nessie.

"She liked Sue but she had a real fear of men. She backed away from me with her tail between her legs."

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However, the family was not one to meet a dog and then leave without her. They named her Nessie. As soon as the family put Nessie in the car and drove away from the farm, everything changed. Nessie perked up and she and Erick became inseparable. Erick had no idea back then that Nessie was a service dog natural.

"A few years after we brought Nessie home, a nurse suggested that Nessie might have it in her to be a good therapy dog. The nurse had seen Nessie a few times at the Pacifica American Legion Post 238, and VFW Post 10245, annual Pier Day in May. Nessie and I would greet veterans as they got off the bus."

On Pier Day, local veterans provide transportation, a fishing event at the Pacifica Pier, and lunch at the Legion Hall to long-term care veterans living at local VA hospitals and their caregivers.

Erick followed the nurse's suggestion and got Nessie certified through Furry Friends as a therapy dog. Following Nessie's graduation, Erick and Nessie found their niche at the Palo Alto VA's Hospice Care Center in 2008.

"I have never seen a dog who will come up to a complete stranger, who is in a bed, hooked up to an IV, surrounded by various wires – and get up on that bed and snuggle next to the patient as if they were her owner," Erick said in that first interview. "It is one thing to come in with a dog and have a patient pat the dog on the head. But early into our visits, I put her up on a chair so she could be a little closer to a patient and she climbed right up on their bed and lay down next to them. And while I apologized, it turns out Nessie knew just what to do. She would sit quietly with a 'stranger' for up to an hour and just let them hold her. To me, this was pretty unusual."

Erick remembered one hospice patient, a pilot who was in his thirties.

"Nessie would climb up on his bed and just let him wrap his arms around her. If the pilot had a seizure, he would hold on to Nessie and she would just stay there with him, without making a sound, and when he came back to consciousness he would pat her on the head."

The little volunteer's visits were always greeted with dog biscuits and hugs.



Erick Digre photo

Nessie Digre with Father Jayson Landeza, pastor of St. Benedict Parish in Oakland, and chaplain to the Oakland Police and Fire departments, December 2016.

In 2011, Erick signed Nessie up with the Palo Alto VA's Voluntary Service Program. That was when the Border Collie's volunteer hours began to be officially recorded. As always, she continued her twice a week, every week, three to four hour patient and staff visits. In June of 2016, Nessie was honored at a banquet, along with other volunteers who had a minimum of 300 service hours, by the VA Palo Alto Health Care System. She was the only four-legged award recipient. Nessie's giving took place outside the hospital facility as well.

In 2017, over a three-day period, Nessie brought her own special brand of kindness to chaplains, firefighters, police officers, counselors and medical personal, who in turn were providing support in the aftermath of the Ghost Ship warehouse fire. She also met with the families of the victims and Oakland's Mary Libby Schaaf. While Nessie couldn't quite keep the pace she had in earlier years, she gave as much as she could in nine and ten-hour shifts.

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In 2019, Nessie was honored again by the VA Health Care System in Palo Alto. She had now given 1,000 hours of service to veterans and their families. Nessie received a beautiful gold pin.

"Nessie had a stroke about three years ago and was partially blind," her nurse pal Linda said. "But she could still get around. She was a humble dog. She didn't expect to be first in line. She just wanted to help everyone. She gave out so many kisses and when I still worked at the VA, she would make a mad dash down the hall to see me. She would get down on the floor and I would get down on the floor and we would look right at each other. We were great friends."

"Nessie was very wise, very fair and very caring," Sue Digre said. Sue and Erick were by Nessie's side when she closed her eyes for the last time. "She was full of life all the time. She was a treasure and is so missed, and she and Erick were an awesome team. I have no doubt she is watching over him now."

"The last time I saw her was two and a half weeks ago," Linda said. "She and Erick made their trip to the hospice unit which included a stop at my house. She couldn't jump up in the truck anymore and Erick had to lift her to put her on patient's beds, but she was so excited to do what she loved doing."



Linda Pries photo

The longtime hospice volunteer posed in Erick's truck, June of 2019.

"She was the best therapy dog," Linda continued, "and a great comfort to those in need with her caring, loving nature and gentle spirit. She will never be forgotten."

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Erick wrote a poem, a portrait of Nessie's work as a Hospice dog. Some of it is presented here.

"She has rested here uncounted times with endless souls. // Some gently stroke her, some talk softly with her, some embrace, kiss her, then weep. // Some lay still as a frozen lake on a December's morn, gulping for a little air, their limbs draped about her. // All love her."



Jean Bartlett photo

Erick and Nessie Digre, September of 2010.

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Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.