

Kuna

Daniel Curry, *Animal Care Specialist*

CHRISTMAS ARRIVED EARLY at Wolf Haven in 1997, for on December 23, Kuna found his way home. He came to us from private ownership with the all too familiar story of a wolf in captivity. He was originally under the care of a salon owner who thought it was a good idea to tie him up in front of her store. She eventually realized that this wasn't appropriate, and Kuna was put in the care of friends who bred German Shepherds. They thought that Kuna was a wolf-dog hybrid, and when they sold their store, solicited Wolf Haven for placement. We generally don't accept hybrids, but offered to help him find some options. One day, the man "caring" for Kuna stopped by with him stuffed inside a very small dog crate. When animal care staff saw him, they realized that he might be a wolf and not a hybrid. Christmas came a little early for Kuna as well that year.

Kuna was a fun loving guy that painted his face with a huge smile which hung from ear to ear. He was ever mischievous, never seeming to outgrow puppyhood. He had this funny lope that was generally inspired by food – the usual source of Kuna's excitement. It was a very gangly trot, almost like a puppy plodding along. Kuna's food focus brought about some bad habits, one of which was hoarding. He had many clever ways of getting his mate's food. He would stand next to the fence, wait until I tossed in his portion, and then start walking over to his food. While he was heading there, I would toss in his mate Badger's food. As soon as Kuna heard the heavy thud of fresh meat hitting the ground, he would turn on a dime and start gunning it over to the other pile of meat to behold what novelties it held. We had to develop new methods of feeding the two of them to thwart Kuna's hoarding attempts.

Many thoughts are evoked when I think of Kuna. I first remember his precious gift of unwavering friendship to me. Like a reliable clock, Kuna was always there at the fence to say hello. Kuna was a born listener. I would find myself talking aloud to him about whatever was bothering me, without really noticing that I was. It was as if he just pulled it out of me like a healing poultice would draw out an infection. Sometimes I'd be frustrated with myself for reflexively talking, so I started going to his enclosure with the conscious thought of not speaking aloud to him about anything personal. Within minutes, I was opening up like I was lying on a couch in a therapist's office. I stopped trying to fight the urge to talk to him and embraced it instead. It became part of our routine; each morning, he would hang around



Kuna. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

the same spot, and not leave my side until I went to the next enclosure. My visits with Kuna became a high point of my morning, and I can only hope of his as well.

Kuna was diagnosed with bone cancer in his front left leg a month before his passing. The cancer initially did not slow him down much other than force him to shift his weight to his right side, unfortunately hiding his Kuna lope forever. As time went on, he started to decline rather quickly though. He fought the cancer as best as he could, but in the end, it was just too strong and he started to seriously struggle. His exuberance for life changed into apathy, and that was our first inkling that his time with us was coming to an end. On October 9, we found Kuna in his deck-pen lying down. You could see in his eyes that he was tired of struggling and that this was too much to fight anymore. We made a heartfelt decision to help our friend leave his body that was quitting on him.

Euthanizing Kuna was the hardest thing I have ever done. I did not want to make Kuna's transition harder than it already was, so I chose to be grateful that he was with two of his best friends. I chose not to cry until he left his body. I chose to pray for his spirit while I preformed his euthanasia. I believe this perspective greatly helped mold Kuna's last experience in his body. It also defines that moment in

time for me and how I will remember it for the rest of my life. Most importantly, I chose to be honored that I was present during my friend's last breath.

The experiences that I had with Kuna made me question fate and its role, or lack thereof, in everyone's life. Does it exist and can you divert from it or is it laid out like a well marked path that you are destined to follow? Did Kuna know that I was going to be the one to directly end his suffering? On those days that we spent together, while I worked and he watched – did he know what lay at the end of the path? Or perhaps it was just a bunch of random events that brought us to that last moment that we shared together. Either way I am most honored that I was present for all the time that we shared together – the good, the sad, the wet, and the dry, the life and the death.

These are all just experiences, and they are what we make of them. There is no bad experience when the time is spent with someone you love, or at least that's the way it should be. In reality, it is hard to see this simple truth sometimes. If Kuna and I would have known that someday it was going to be my hand holding the drug that ended his suffering, would that knowledge have altered how we treated one another? Would I have focused on the sad end of the path and tainted or even missed all the beauty along the way? Life is too short to occupy your time looking at the world through a negative scope. Like Kuna, I hope that I will always be excited for life until it is time to go.