



Roxy – A Brave American Staffordshire Terrier Fights Lymphoma

In March 2009, Melissa Goodwin was petting her seven-year-old American Staffordshire Terrier, Roxy, when she found a swelling on her belly, near Roxy's back legs. A strong, healthy and active dog, Roxy had no previous illness and was scheduled for her yearly check-up, so Melissa brought the swelling to the attention of her veterinarian. Her veterinarian showed Melissa other swollen lymph nodes in the back of Roxy's legs, in her throat, in front of her shoulders, and on her chest. The lymph nodes were sampled to confirm her diagnosis. Three days later, Melissa and her fiancé, Ken Freiheit, were given the news that Roxy had lymphoma.

At the recommendation of their veterinarian, Melissa and Ken made an appointment for Roxy at CARES the next day. "At this point, I was already inconsolable," explains Melissa. "I had been doing research online and realized that we were dealing with an incurable disease, and our sweet girl was in for the fight of her life. Ken remained our rock, which was a hard role for him to have to take because Roxy was a daddy's girl, but he stayed calm and collected in the face of this awful diagnosis."

CARES Oncology Specialist Dr. Beth Overley reviewed the test results and confirmed the Lymphoma diagnosis. Dr. Overley explained the illness, answered questions and offered treatment recommendations for Roxy. Ken and Melissa were determined to give Roxy a chance to spend more time with her family, which included Ken and Melissa and her two canine sisters, a Bull Terrier named Diamond and another Staffie named Heidi. Roxy began chemotherapy treatment that same day.

The next few months involved treatment for Roxy both at CARES and at home. Ken and Melissa administered medications, monitored side effects and watched for any changes in Roxy's behavior.

"We also made sure she enjoyed every day with us, and we cherished every moment with her," said Melissa. "Roxy loved her mornings spent at CARES for check-ups, blood work and treatments. She adored Dr. Overley and the oncology nurses, Missy and Rose. She was always awake before me on treatment days, and excited to head into the back [to the oncology ward] when one of the nurses came out to get her. She trusted her caregivers and felt safe with them. We never once had regrets about making the decision to treat her."

While patients are expected to experience some side effects, Ken and Melissa were surprised just how good Roxy's quality of life was during treatment. Melissa says, "She had little or no side effects on treatment days and her activity level barely changed. She would get tired a bit more easily after a treatment, but would be back to normal within hours."

Roxy spent a wonderful spring and summer swimming in the pool with her family and with anyone else who had the energy to keep up with her. She sunbathed in "her" hammock, and let her ears flap in the

wind while riding in the car. She lounged in a chair near the bonfires Ken and Melissa made on cool nights and sprawled across Ken's and Melissa's laps daily. "She even continued to snore between us in bed—life never changed for her."

Treatment ended in the beginning of October. Roxy celebrated by dressing as her "hero" for Halloween - a canine oncologist. "Roxy did everything on her bucket list," said Melissa. "She enjoyed playing in the snow with her sisters in December, she dressed in her furry jacket, and she had her picture taken with Santa as she had done every year before. Her visit with Santa was videotaped by the local TV station, and Roxy had her 5 minutes of fame. She celebrated her 8th birthday on January 2nd."

A few weeks after her birthday, Melissa, who was vigilant about examining every inch of Roxy on a daily basis, noticed lumps in Roxy's throat. A visit to CARES confirmed that Roxy was out of remission. Because studies showed that dogs often respond well to a second round of treatment, Ken and Melissa chose to begin immediately. Roxy seemed a bit more tired this time, and the lymph nodes did not shrink quickly as they had the first time. One Saturday, Roxy had difficulty getting out of bed in the morning, and she became more exhausted as the day went on.

"In our hearts, we knew she was sicker this time. Ken and I slept on the floor with her that night, keeping her hydrated and comfortable. I wanted to take her in to CARES in the middle of the night, but Ken insisted that we wait until morning. She was really sick, and he knew what I could not bring myself to admit."

In the morning, Roxy was admitted as an emergency patient, and the doctors immediately started her on IV fluids and began observation and testing to determine what was going on inside Roxy's body. CARES Emergency and Critical Care Veterinarian Dr. Jennifer Chabot confirmed Roxy's condition was deteriorating and told Ken and Melissa that the chance of recovery from such an advanced state was nearly impossible. The cancer had moved to Roxy's bone marrow and other internal organs, and the great quality of life that Roxy had enjoyed was declining rapidly.

As Ken and Melissa waited in an exam room, Roxy was carried into the room on a blanket. Her expression at the sight of Ken and Melissa could only be explained as one of happiness and relief. The family's grief and sadness were put aside for the moment to put Roxy at peace.

"We said our goodbyes and let her go," said Melissa. "We knew we made the right decision, but the sadness was overwhelming."

"From our initial consultation with Dr. Overley to the day we picked up Roxy's remains to bring her home, the entire staff at CARES exceeded any expectations we could have had. The women at the front desk were always accommodating, helpful, and kind, whether I called to bother everyone with my questions, or whether we were in for an appointment. The various staff coming in and out of the waiting room would always stop to say hello and to visit us."

"Dr. Overly and the oncology nurses, Missy and Rose, were absolutely amazing. Their kindness, knowledge and pure love of animals shone through in everything that they did. I could never thank them enough for taking such wonderful care of Roxy. They are truly special people who put their heart and soul into caring for these animals."

Melissa has kept in contact with Dr. Overley and together they participated in a Canine Cancer Awareness Walk-A-Thon at the end of September 2010. Dr. Overley brought along her dog, Spanky, a regular fixture at CARES. Spanky had become great friends with Roxy during her treatment. Melissa also brought along pictures of Roxy, and she and Dr. Overley kept them in their pockets and close to their hearts as they walked to honor her and her memory. “I never expected to come out of this with new friends,” said Melissa.

“They say that something good comes out of something bad. We have referred CARES to countless friends and family for both emergency situations, and those requiring a specialist. We are truly blessed that such an amazing facility exists locally, and I am extremely thankful and honored to be able to count Dr. Overley and Spanky as friends.”

Dr. Overley feels the same way.

