



KPETS founder Karen Gerth and her golden retriever, Sam.

More Than *warm* and *fuzzy*

At the close of 2002, Karen Gerth worked in the IT department of a retirement community. She had no clue then that 10 years later she would be running an organization with more than 300 volunteers and helping thousands of people every month heal from sickness, injury and heartache.

Keystone Pet-Enhancement Therapy Services, founded by Gerth and known to its friends as KPETS, is a nonprofit animal assisted therapy group whose canine and owner “teams” visit such venues as hospitals, schools and rehab centers to assist in the healing and/or learning process. How do they do this? “Everything is more fun when a dog is around,” jokes Gerth. “We might play ‘fetch’ with a patient recovering from shoulder surgery or have a child read to a dog who provides a very nonintimidating audience for him. There is something remarkable that happens when animals are added into the equation.”

Several years ago, Gerth began volunteering with her three-legged dog, Pod, for two national animal therapy groups, but their processes were not ideal, recalls Gerth.

“The big, national associations just could not keep up with the screening required for all of the teams that wanted to volunteer. This caused a huge bottleneck and was frustrating for those of us who wanted to get out and serve with our pets.”

This operational problem, Gerth recalls, caused her to consider how she could create a more streamlined process to serve local teams and patients more effectively. “It took some time, but I came up with a screening process and a mission statement and went to work. I contacted several facilities and asked if they would be interested in our services. Most were very receptive.”

Then came the paperwork.

Compiling the necessary documentation to incorporate and obtain the nonprofit status was a major roadblock for Gerth, who studied computer technology in college. “I hadn’t received training to do anything like this,” she recalls, “and we didn’t have the budget for legal help. I just researched and read everything I could.”

When Gerth completed the forms at home, she handed them off to an attorney at work to glance over. “I didn’t want to get thrown in jail,” she laughs, “so I thought it would be best to have a professional take a look at everything.” The lawyer gave the go-ahead and, in August of 2003, KPETS was born.

But Gerth still worked full-time. Finding time to assemble volunteers, screen pets and handle the red tape was complicated and demanding. Gerth, admittedly, was overwhelmed and exhausted. In January of 2010, funds allowed her to bring in one part-time worker to help with volunteers and scheduling. Six months later, KPETS hired its founder as its first full-time employee. Gerth remembers, “It was a great day for me.”

Now, KPETS’ volunteers serve in most Pennsylvania counties, and the organization has even launched into other states. Gerth doesn’t venture to speculate what’s in store for KPETS, but says the possibilities are limitless. “I have surrounded myself with strong people who are pushing to help us grow and touch more lives. It is terrifying, actually, but exciting.”

Gerth has a message to others with a dream: “If there is something you really want to do, don’t give up. If you keep working hard, things will fall into place as they should. Just keep pushing through.” **HBG**

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