

First Person

Losing Zeke

By Polly Ingraham

As parents, we are intent on providing positive, enriching experiences to our children – schools with lively classrooms, activities that broaden their horizons and develop their skills. We try to nourish as well as protect them in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes, however, life turns on us and we find ourselves in a different role: suffering a loss alongside our kids. There are moments when consolation fails us, when we are hurting as much as they are. That's what happened in our family when we had to put down our wonderful black Lab, Zeke.

When I asked my son the most important thing we could do for Zeke, he said, "Make sure he can enjoy his days."

This wasn't the first time our kids had lost an animal. Our mysterious cat Natasha disappeared and never came back. (We imagined her demise at the jaws of a fisher cat or coyote.) But losing this dog was much worse because Zeke was such an integral part of our family.

We all feel his absence – every time we arrive in the driveway and he doesn't rush over to greet us; every time we see a tennis ball and there's no reason to pick it up; every time it seems like a good moment for a walk in the woods but there's no companion; every time we go up to bed and don't hear paws climbing behind us.

AFTER MY HUSBAND came back from the vet's office on that terrible afternoon and the kids got home from school and heard the news, we sat together in the living room and sobbed. A few months before, glowing faces had come down to find Christmas stockings here. This was a very different moment, but no less real or important.

As my older son, Willie, said, "We couldn't have asked for a better dog." Zeke was completely devoted to us, tail wagging at the mere sound of our voices and ready to join any activity.

During baseball season, Willie would hit ball after ball, practicing his swing, and Zeke would

retrieve tirelessly.

He showed exuberance for life, day in and day out. And our kids got the benefit of this fantastic personality.

Last summer, when we went to stay on a lake in Quebec, Zeke swam to his heart's content and played with his "cousin" just as our kids played with theirs.

Only in the last couple of days of his life did he lose his zest. In the end, he went outside to hide under a bush. My husband had to lift him into the car. It was good that the kids weren't home to watch.

Some people have told me recently that they grew up without pets because their parents wanted to spare them the inevitable endings. There are plenty of other reasons not to bring creatures into our homes, but this one strikes a nerve with me now.

Since losing Zeke, I have thought a lot about what children get (or lose?) when they take in an animal as part of the family. Our kids went through Zeke's illness with us, seeing what had to be done for him along the way.

He had to wear one of those plastic cones after surgery (bumping into walls with it at first), and then he needed medication during the chemotherapy stage. The pills had side effects – he had to go out more, and he also grabbed more food from the counters – so we all had to adjust. The kids also knew what the vets had told us: Zeke would be lucky to last another six months.

When I asked Henry, our youngest child, what he thought was the most important thing we could do for Zeke during this time, he said, "Make sure he can enjoy his days." All of us became more attuned to what dog wishes might be.

A few years ago, Henry watched the movie version of "Charlotte's Web," a book I had not yet read aloud to him. Afterward, he said that the story was about "doing something good before you die." I hope now that he can remember how we tried to be good to Zeke before he left us. As the poet Philip Larkin wrote,

The first day after a death, the new absence/ Is always the same; we should be careful/ Of each other, we should be kind/ While there is still time. □

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