

Wednesday, April 12, 2017



Why do you have a dog at the airport? What is a therapy dog?



My name is Pete Friedman and my canine therapy partner is Tessa the Golden Retriever, and those are two questions we are asked every time we make a therapy visit to Memphis International Airport. We are one of eight therapy teams that are cleared by TSA to go through security and visit with passengers at the gates.

Back to the questions - just why is Tessa walking down the concourse or in the gate area? Perhaps this story will answer those questions.

It was just last week when we arrived at Gate A27 – a Southwest Airlines gate. It was crowded with families headed to Orlando for spring break including a dance team going to a national competition. This would be a fun visit – lots of kids and other passengers who would enjoy meeting Tessa.

The first person I saw was a young girl clutching a well-worn Winnie the Pooh bear. She was maybe 8 – about the age of my granddaughter. She was with her mother and looked quite sad, a perfect job for a therapy dog like Tessa. Over we went to greet the mother and daughter with Tessa leading the way and wagging her tail in greeting.



Then I saw it - hanging over the suitcase handle – a white plastic bag that said St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital. Perhaps that explained the sad face on the little girl and the mother talking very seriously on the phone. I introduced Tessa to the little girl and asked if she wanted to pet Tessa. The little girl tentatively touched Tessa’s fur. Tessa sat quietly next to her. Then Tessa lay on the floor at her feet; the little girl climbed off her seat and sat next to Tessa – a little smile on her face.



The mother was now off the phone and petting Tessa, also saying they had come from St. Jude, had made this trip many times and were headed home. I decided that Tessa and I would stay with them as long as the little girl was happy to be petting Tessa. And we did! Fifteen minutes later – filled with small talk with the mother – I watched the little girl slowly relax and smile. Finally, the little girl got off the floor and sat back on her chair. The mother was smiling too and seemed more at ease.

Tessa and I bid them goodbye and walked off to the next passenger feeling that a therapy dog had made a difference.

This is why Tessa and I go to the airport, why we take the time to go through security, walk to a gate and greet passengers. You never know who will be there and how a therapy dog may be just what they need that day.