

WW POWER OF LOVE

A little love and a furry friend can change lives forever!



"I know Sandra is proud of her sweet girl. She brings so much joy," says Lisa with Gaia

When her neighbor passed away, Lisa Kanarek opened her heart and home to the woman's dog, Gaia—and ended up giving both their lives new joy and purpose

On a cool October afternoon in 2019, Lisa Kanarek walked to her next-door neighbor's house and rang the doorbell. A well-dressed woman in her late-70s, with perfectly coiffed silver hair and a welcoming smile, opened the door and cheerily said, "Come in."

Lisa and her husband had just moved the month before to their home in Dallas, and Lisa immediately took to their new neighbor, Sandra. As the pair spoke, Sandra's white-and-tan 9-year-old husky, Gaia, walked slowly up behind Sandra and lay down on her side.

"She loves having her stomach rubbed," Sandra said. Lisa then knelt down and scratched the pup's tummy.

Over the years, Lisa reached out to Sandra to see if she needed help when an ice storm hit the area or during the Covid-19 pandemic. But Sandra always declined these kind offers and Lisa thought, *She seems to like keeping to herself.*

Then last Thanksgiving at 2 AM, Lisa saw the red flashing lights of an ambulance in front of Sandra's house. Lisa hurried outside to find EMTs rolling a gurney into the 80-year-old's home. Not wanting to pry, she didn't ask questions.

The next day, Lisa remembered Gaia. She texted Sandra's friend, Gilda: *Is the dog okay? Is Sandra okay?* Gilda shared that she didn't know; that she was out of town.



Gaia with hospice nurses



Bedside visits brighten patients' days



Kids adore Gaia

I'll go and check on Gaia, Lisa replied. As Lisa slowly opened the door, Gaia stepped out of a back bedroom and peered tentatively at her. She then calmly walked up beside Lisa, who began stroking her. *Can I bring her to my house?* Lisa asked Gilda in a text.

Yes, thank you, Gilda replied.

A loving bond

As the days passed, Lisa fell in love with sweet, shy Gaia, enjoying leisurely walks together around the neighborhood. And Gaia lapped up the attention she got from people they met.

A week later, Sandra came home from the hospital, and Lisa returned Gaia to her mom. Gilda moved in to help Sandra out, as her health continued to decline. Lisa came by to walk Gaia twice a day, their bond continuing to grow. Gaia would eagerly wait at the window for Lisa's arrival and she'd wag her tail excitedly as she greeted Lisa when she walked into the house.

Gilda saw how much Gaia loved her new friend, and one day asked Lisa, "Would you consider taking Gaia when Sandra passes away?" Lisa quickly replied, "Sure, I'd love to." Gilda looked down at Gaia and said, "This is going to be your new mom."

Nuzzles and smiles

Within weeks, Sandra passed away in her bed, surrounded by Gilda and her husband. Soon after, Gilda's husband told Lisa it was time to take Gaia.

Lisa, in tears, put on Gaia's leash and walked her down the driveway. In the coming days, Lisa kept a close eye on the pup to make sure she was okay and gave her lots of love. And Gaia gave her back just as much love.

In fact, Lisa noticed the calming effect Gaia had on everyone she met, particularly children, and she started thinking how wonderful it would be for this gentle fluffball to visit sick kids in the hospital. So she certified Gaia as a therapy dog.

Gaia, who hardly left home in those final years with Sandra and was quite

shy, has blossomed during her visits with the kids at Children's Health hospital in Dallas, welcoming their loving pets.

"Dogs are like the best thing that ever happened to me in the hospital," a smiling young girl gushed as Gaia nuzzled her nose into the girl's outstretched hand.

Today, Gaia is spreading even more joy. As a newly certified end-of-life doula, Lisa began bringing the pup with her during visits to a hospice facility.

Lisa shared their story in *The Washington Post*: "As we pass through the halls of the children's hospital, I think of Sandra and hope she's smiling, knowing how much joy Gaia brings to everyone she meets."

"If I can make someone's day better by supporting them, by comforting them, that confirms I am doing what I should be doing," says Lisa. "I feel I am making a difference and so is Gaia—and she really enjoys it too!"

—Diane Herbst

"I feel that I am making a difference and so is Gaia—and she really enjoys it too!"

How to help pets whose owners can no longer care for them

1 Help financially

Organizations like Voice for the Animals Foundation provide seniors and people with terminal illnesses financial support they may need to care for their pets. To apply, visit VFTAFoundation.org, click on "Programs," then "Helping Friends."

2 Reach out to rescues

"If a friend or loved one is very ill or has died and you are unable to care for their pet, more often than not, local rescues can help if you just ask," says Annie Torres, founder of the nonprofit rescue Crash Fund, Inc., which helps deceased owners' pets.

3 Plan ahead

Experts urge pet owners to name a guardian for their furry family members ahead of time. Pet Peace of Mind (PetPeaceOfMind.org) offers an online form, My Pet Placement Plan, to name and instruct a guardian for your pet.



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