

Jim and Kona, A Healing Team

By Rose Gannon, Editor

Some retirements are marked by travel, others by golf. For Jim, retirement meant something different: finding a new partner with four legs, a wagging tail, and a gift for healing.

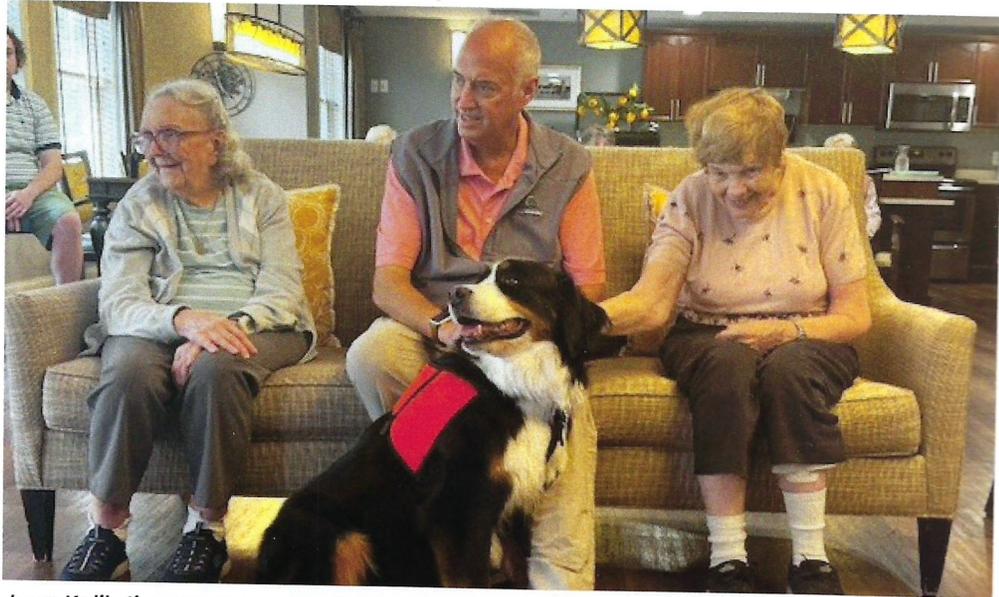
In June of 2024, newly retired and ready for a project, Jim found his next calling. He wanted to adopt a dog with the right temperament to become a therapy dog- a way to give back to his community. That dog was Kona.

She came from an Amish puppy mill, subdued and weary, with Lyme disease, but Jim saw Kona's true personality beneath. When Jim and his family met her, his daughters home from college and everyone gathered, it was love at first sight. Despite her background, she had a sweetness and a love of people that radiates to everyone she meets. Jim knew instantly that it was a perfect match.

After a few weeks, Kona quietly announced that she was home for good. During a gathering, she stole an entire round of brie off of the coffee table. Far from being scolded, Jim proclaimed that it was a moment of joy. It was proof that she finally felt safe enough in her new home to misbehave, certain that she would not be cast out.

The brie was just the beginning of Kona unveiling her personality. As her spirits rose, she started to play, chasing other dogs at the park. "She's quite fast for a Bernese Mountain Dog." Though it took a few weeks, once her personality began to unfurl, she showed exactly why Jim had chosen her. "She loves people more than other dogs," he explains. "She is eager to please, easy to train, calm, and happy to just sit and be pet."

The inspiration to pursue therapy dog work came from Jim's desire to give back. He sought out the organization Dog B.O.N.E.S. to begin his work: Dogs Building Opportunities for Nurturing and Emotional Support, a local Massachusetts non-profit whose primary purpose is to provide well-trained, insured, therapy dog teams to hospitals, nursing facilities, and schools across Massachusetts. Their requirements were detailed- he



Joan Kalil, Jim Nauen, and Ruth Rogers.

needed to have Kona for at least 6 months, ensure her basic obedience was proficient, and commit to three weekends of evaluation.

Kona and Jim, true to form, excelled. In training sessions, dogs are exposed to medical equipment, poked and prodded as a child might, and tested for composure in unpredictable situations. Kona accepted it all with serene patience. "When the vest comes out, she knows her job. She knows she is going to work, and she loves it."

Visits vary- at senior homes, for example, residents might gather in groups of five or thirty. Kona happily settles beside each one, leaning in for pets and treats. Jim answers their questions, tells stories, and watches faces brighten. At libraries, the work shifts- children who need to practice their reading sit and read aloud to Kona. She never interrupts, never corrects, never judges. Sometimes half of each session is spent reading, and the other half petting Kona. Regardless of how much reading is done, the children walk away more confident. At Jim's local library, sessions are always fully booked up.

At one visit to a care facility, Jim and Kona sat in a lobby chatting with a resident while he and Kona waited for staff. She happily pet Kona and learned about her past. Later, Jim received an email from the facility. The woman had been depressed,

unreachable to those who cared for her. Meeting Kona broke through, giving her joy that lasted for days. Jim had no idea. "Collateral happiness," he calls it.

Therapy work sounds romantic, Jim admits, but it is real work. An hour-long visit demands constant attention, reading both the dog and the humans. There are often challenges, such as residents grabbing without knowing better. The handler must be vigilant, ready to end a visit if Kona is ever showing signs of stress. "You have to be willing to share your dog with strangers," Jim says. And you need to be honest about how your dog will interact with people who can sometimes act irrationally."

It takes a special kind of person to thrive in this type of work- patient, compassionate, someone good with both people and dogs- and Jim is exactly that. He assures that the rewards of this work outweigh every challenge. From the seniors who wait eagerly for companionship, the children whose fluency excels, to the strangers whose days are lifted- Kona brings light.

As for Kona, she continues her transformation from mill dog to beloved companion, from wallflower to star. She is living proof of what happens when a second chance finds the right match- a dog who heals as she is healed, and who gives back by simply being herself.