

For the Love of Lillie

By Pamela Reederthwaite

Our daughter, Karen, was exactly five pounds when she entered the world. My husband and I excitedly discussed how beautiful she was. But after a few months, we realized that something was terribly wrong. The doctors confirmed that our baby would progress slower and her learning would stop sooner than average. The fear that loomed over me was that no one would love this child except us. But God gifted this wonderful girl with two very special qualities. She has the most radiant smile that can be imagined which makes those around her smile. She also has the gift of gab; personality is expressed with each word. We describe her as the happiest second grader that you will ever meet; it's just that she happens to be an adult.

Her schooling started at the age of six months and her teachers were phenomenal. But schooling only follows a person for a certain number of years and Karen's school years came to an end. Wes and I worked and Karen's highlight of most days was to walk to the mailbox and bring in the mail. She was a huge help with household chores, but is that exciting? Changes needed to be made.

We moved north with our daughter in tow. The three of us worked together fixing up an old farm, and then came the special time to add our four hooved friends. My beautiful Tabiano paint was first. I named her Zoe because it means life. She definitely adds life to our farm.

As my husband, Wes, was looking for his horse of choice, Karen excitedly let us know that she wanted one too. Oh, no, why didn't we see this coming? We should have known that she would ask for a friend of her own, but it didn't occur to us. We wanted Karen to enjoy our chickens, ducks and the farm life in general. I went into a complete and total panic, as I did not want any harm to come to my special child. What if we were trail riding and she was thrown? What



Karen and Lillie

if what if? I had a complete list of fears to pull from.

I decided to get on the internet and study equines. During the many hours of my web surfing, I found out that mules are sure-footed and they are thinkers. They will not blindly obey the person on their back if they sense danger. Because they protect themselves, they also protect the rider that they carry. This is the main reason that they are used on the Grand Canyon trails with inexperienced (and experienced) riders.

Now that my fears were somewhat alleviated, how to convince Karen that she should have a mule versus a horse like Mom's. We started the discussion, but she needed no convincing; she embraced it for all it was worth. We began mule hunting immediately. We came across a mule named Rosie with the best disposition that we could ever ask for. She was perfect in every way and she was purchased. She just happened to be pastured with a Belgium draft

horse named Tiny. Karen fell in love with Rosie and Wes fell in love with Tiny, so we bought them both. Due to Tiny's size, they needed to be brought home in separate loads.

Rosie was loaded up and brought to the farm first. She was backed out of the horse trailer covered with sweat. We felt bad because she was so scared. Now that she was unloaded, she realized that her pasture mate was not there to support her and the braying began. Loud, long braying filled the air. We live at "Reed Valley Farm" which is named because we reside in a valley, a valley that echoes sounds. It was not five minutes before the neighbors started arriving. "What is that sound?" each would ask. We smiled as we let them know that Karen was a proud owner of a mule!

Rosie would always be the first one to greet us in the morning. She would rub her face on Karen to let her know that she loved her. When Karen sat on the barn's step,

Rosie would come up and place her jaw on Karen's shoulder. It was truly a wonderful love relationship. But, because we were new at this, we did not realize how to judge the age of an equine. Rosie was old. We only had her a little over a year when she got sick and we lost her. We will never forget that day, it was 9/11 and we spent that day and many days after in tears. You notice I said we, not she. All three of us felt the loss of Rosie and all three of our hearts were broken. It's hard losing a friend.

Six weeks later, we decided that we needed to pick our hearts up off of the floor and start looking for a new best friend for Karen. Looking around, we found out that "Crossroads Donkey Rescue" was relatively close. They had a mule named "Miss Lillie" that was six years old. The rescue truthfully advertised that she had stifles, a situation where her back legs will "lock up." You will hear a "pop" and then she can walk normal again. Our son, Brian, called when he found out what we were considering, "Mom, Karen has already lost one mule. Pick out a completely healthy mule so that she doesn't have to go through another loss." We appreciated his concern and weighed the options, but Karen said, "Mom, I'm special needs. Why can't I have a best friend that has special needs too?"

We decided to pile into our mini-van and make the trek east to the rescue. They had many equines of every kind and we could make the decision of which one to adopt when we got there. Amy met us at our van with a smile. She took us out back where approximately 50 choices stood in their pasture. Because we had discussed Miss Lillie on the phone, she brought her out first. Miss Lillie walked right up to Karen and laid her head on Karen's shoulder. Well that was it; the decision was made. Karen didn't pick out Miss Lillie, Miss Lillie had just picked out Karen for her forever friend! But Karen received more than just Lillie as Karen and Amy became friends that day too.

Rosie taught us that mules are docile, cooperative, loving, and dependable; and that is what we believed about mules UNTIL Lillie arrived! We now believe that old mules are docile and cooperative. Lillie

was not old. She is loving, adventurous, and full of spunk and EEEEEEEEE. Whenever another equine got too close we could hear her "EEEEEEEE" across the valley. We call her the drama queen and smile from ear to ear as she constantly entertains us with her antics. We've given up much of our TV watching; we would rather watch "the kids."

The corner of the horse pasture contained some long stemmed weeds. We were used to watching Lillie pull up a weed by the roots, smack it on the ground to get all of the dirt off, and then eat it. One day we watched in shock when she decided to change her routine. She pulled the weed up by the roots and proceeded to smack it on the side of our donkey's face to get the dirt off! At first, he just stood there trying to figure everything out, but then he went on the



Lillie and Dudley with their rubber feeder

attack mode. Watching the two of them chase each other around kept us laughing for a long time.

Lillie, along with Dudley our donkey, love to remove the rubber feeders in the barn. They take them outside and have tugs of war. Karen asked her Dad why he didn't screw them to the wall so that when it was time to feed them, they would be there. "No, we can't do that. The feeders are their toys and they are so much fun to watch. Would you want to miss all that fun?" No, she agreed that we wouldn't want to miss that.

Karen and I were surprised when we went to Tractor Supply shopping. Our cashier happened to be named Mollie. Karen said, "I have a molly and her name is Lillie." The cashier looked at her very strangely so I stepped in. "You do know that a female mule is a molly, right?" "No, I didn't know that." Working at Tractor Supply, I just assumed she would know it. "Oops! Did you WANT to know that?" She didn't answer, only smiled. We left with red faces and grins.

Karen definitely has always carried the "shopping gene." Our family went clothes shopping and Karen headed toward the night clothes section. She methodically went through each rack of clothes, checking carefully to decide which item would make her the happiest. After she made her final





Lillie in her birthday hat

choice, she brought it to us for our approval. We were surprised to read “#1 Mom.” We didn’t know what to say until she explained that she was Lillie’s mom. Well, now that we understood the situation, we immediately agreed to her choice.

Can’t find Karen? No problem as we know where to look. She is either in the barn or out in the field, depending on where she finds Lillie. Karen loves to spend time with her precious mule, and it gives her exercise. She has lost 40 pounds since moving to the farm, and much is attributed to fol-

lowing Lillie around the pasture talking to her beautiful friend who completely loves her back. Karen’s thoughts and actions are filled with Miss Lillie and her needs and wants. Lillie is definitely Karen’s passion. The only problem is that Wes and I love Lillie too. We don’t know whether to be happy or disappointed when we are giving her attention and Karen comes into the pasture. Lillie consistently and immediately leaves us and goes to her friend, Karen. I guess that proves that Karen is Lillie’s passion as well.

We now have seven equines to feed, and have 25 acres in hay to support them. Baling, stacking, and transporting the hay to our barn to restack in the correct place for winter is a large chore. When Karen thinks that it’s just too much, we gently tell her to go give Lillie a big hug. When she returns to us we always ask, “Is it too much work?” “No, I love Lillie. It’s worth it!” All three of us feel the same. The work that it takes to care for them pales in the brilliant light of the love that we receive every day. And

Lillie’s stifles? They are a thing of the past as we found that Selenium supplements and exercise have alleviated any symptoms of the pesky annoyance.

Being a writer has given me the opportunity to deliver speeches at various events. Last year, our church requested that I give a speech at a Women’s Refresh meeting. The speech was about our move to the farm and the wonderful experiences here. At the end, I had pictures on the screen of various things, but when we got to the picture of Karen and her Miss Lillie, the crowd erupted in tremendous applause. Our church family loves Karen, and no one who knows Karen is unaware of her Lillie. She will brag to all who will listen about her beautiful mule. My eyes filled with tears of joy when I looked over the audience to see how excited Karen was when the sounds of clapping filled the room. Yes, Karen and Lillie did it again, filled our hearts with love!