

Journey with a SARDS Dog
Our life with a gallant Newfoundland



This is the last story of a gallant Newfoundland mix who we rescued on MLK day in 2001 when he was just a very young puppy. He was so calm and so gentle that he immediately won our hearts totally. I took him through Basic Obedience, then the Canine Good Citizen program. A while after that he completed Delta Society Pet Partner training as a therapy dog. This was followed by joining the READ program to help young children with reading difficulties. Kody was my “special” dog among our 14 rescues. He succeeded a big black lab, Paladin, whom I had for 15 years. Kody became part of my heart just like Pal. I thought I would have him for 10 years or so and enjoy every moment of it. We cannot think of a single “bad” thing Kody ever did. He was as close to being a perfect dog for us that can be imagined. And then the unthinkable happened.

Late September 2006

Kody is acting very strange, almost depressed. Eating and drinking OK so don't know what's wrong. Nothing I can really put my finger on. He doesn't follow me from room to room the way he used to.

Early October

Kody is missing the balls when I throw them. Guess he is out of practice as we haven't had time to play ball for a while. Still walking in the woods and everything else seems OK.

October in VA.-

Kody doesn't want to jump up into the Jeep, or get in Nan's motor home. Take him to the vet in Floyd because he seems so depressed. They run blood work and do general check up. Think maybe he has arthritis. Say he needs to lose weight. Give us medicine for his ears which are kind of a mess. Blood work shows nothing amiss.

Mid November

Kody still acting funny. Does not want to take his walks in the woods. Especially leery about walking down the street to get to the woods entrance. Take him to local vet. They rerun blood work. Everything fine. Also do urine analysis. That's OK too. Give us Rimadyl for arthritis. He still acts funny about the woods.

December 6, 2006

Have a little time to play ball with Kody. Threw several in the house and he obviously doesn't see them. One lands on his head and he doesn't even react. He must be blind. I'm crying when Ron comes in the door. He too, tries to check Kody's sight and agrees something is very wrong.

December 7, 2006

Back to the local vet who agrees Kody cannot track things but says he can't see anything immediately and obviously wrong with the eye or retina. Refers us to Canine Ophthalmologist.

December 8, 2006

Canine Ophthalmologist- Diagnosis SARDS- Sudden Acquired Retinal Degeneration Syndrome. Our baby is blind, no known cause, no known cure. Our world crumbles a lot along with his. We cry for him. He is so depressed and confused. I begin to hunt the Internet for information. There is not much.

We will try to make his world as stable and secure as possible. I tell Terri and Cheryl that he will not be doing therapy work for a while. Terri will have to make arrangements for another team to cover Heritage nursing home next week.

December 15, 2006

Have to take Midnight to the vet for a throat abscess. Vet tells me the last SARDS dog they had only lived 8 months after diagnosis and they don't know why he died. That scared me A LOT!

December 23, 2006

Order book on Living with Blind Dogs. We are trying to teach Kody patterns and naming surfaces he walks on hoping that he will be able to associate those surfaces with other things in his life. He is very depressed and scared. The most peculiar thing is that he walks in circles, always to the left just like Mite did. He will turn to the right if you hold his collar and move him in that direction but he does not turn right on his own, or walk in a straight line. He seems to have trouble hearing what direction our voices are coming from. Acutely sensitive to anyone touching his ears. They seem to be infected and am trying to clear that up. We're learning to keep doors shut so he can't get into the wrong places. We did put up a Christmas tree and had to rearrange the living room to do that which is the one thing the "authorities" say not to do. He

seemed to handle that quite well though. Of course he is so depressed that's he's not moving around much.

Christmas Day

Kody gets his treats along with the others. We are glad to have him with us and pray it will be many more years.

December 29, 2006

Early in the day Kody got himself wedged behind the Christmas tree. We decide to take it down early and reset the living room so that he cannot get himself in places where he can't get out. The dining room is difficult though, we can't block it off like the other rooms. He gets under the table and can't see to get out through the chairs. Pulls the whole table around. Am trying to teach him the command "back" so that he can back out of places but that seems difficult. He used to know that. Also, while he will walk to the mail box with me he will no longer "Carry the mail". That used to be his daily job. Maybe when he gets more used to the situation it will be OK again. Our gallant Newfy always looked so proud when he brought the mail to the house.

Kody slept by my bed early in the night. About 2:15 he started roaming the bedroom. Got up and took him out. He walked in circles, drank a little water from the fountain. After about 30 minutes brought him back in. He would get up and down, roaming the room again. Took him out several more times. Each time he drank water but would not settle back down and go to sleep. About 5 I decided to go to the living room where his roaming would not disturb the others. Took pillow, sat in the recliner and covered up.. Kody roamed but Bailey, Sassie and Brandy were sleeping on the furniture so he did not bother them. We finally fell asleep somewhere around 6. I woke up at 8:45 on December 30. Kody had managed to get in the small bathroom and close the door behind him. Made a huge mess in there. Shampooed carpet first thing after I got up.

December 30, 2006

Kody was very restless again and we slept in the living room. When he finally fell asleep again Kody slept until about 10:00, went out with Ron (I was at paint store) and did both jobs. Also drank a lot of water. Came back in, laid down but was exhibiting the trembling that I have seen from time to time. Don't know if it's a nerve problem or just fear, given this terrible new situation he finds himself in. Considered taking him to vets but getting him in Jeep will be a real task and the Volvo is in the shop. Will see how he does today and may take him in Saturday morning. We will keep Kody more active during the late afternoon and early evening and see if he sleeps better. I'm exhausted from lack of sleep trying to keep track of him as he wanders at night to see he doesn't get himself in trouble. During the day he seems a little better. Wanders over to Ron to get his butt scratched for the first time in weeks.

December 31, 2006

Keeping him up seemed to work better. He slept by my bed all night. It's raining very hard so that may have had something to do with it. Got all the dogs out to do their business, took Kody out front with me. He was startled by the rain at first but then seemed to recognize it. Did his piddle, but not the other. Will have to go back out next time he starts to roam. Judging when he needs to go out and when he is just restless is kind of tricky. The book I ordered arrived yesterday. The author seems to feel that commercial pet food is a major factor in SARDS. I am reducing the amount of kibble in his diet and increasing the "natural" food. It won't bring his sight back but if she's right it should help him feel better and live longer. We're willing to try anything that seems reasonable in order to help him. I am going to make a vet appointment for Tuesday and talk about running the hormone panel test. We have been really busy today so Kody has been sleeping. Need to get him up and out so that he will sleep again tonight- if the fireworks don't bother him.

January 2, 2007

Kody had a very restless night last night (Jan 1) and this morning had what appeared to be a small seizure. When he first laid down last night he trembled very badly. I covered him with my bathrobe and Brandy came and laid next to him. Nothing seemed to help. I think the trembling is related to the onset of seizures in some way. He doesn't always have a seizure following them but it seems to be such uncontrollable spasming. He has been sleeping since about 8 AM and it's now 11. I am so worried about my boy. I emailed the vet at VA. Tech who is doing SARDS research this morning hoping he can at least tell me what to expect.

I called the clinic that did the diagnosis and they say the seizure is unrelated to SARDS.

Kody sleeps most of this day- 9-3. He has trouble walking, we have trouble getting him into the car to take to the vets. Dr. is agreeable to doing the Immunology and Endocrinology testing recommended but doesn't know where to send it yet. Will check and let us know by Thursday. Ordinary blood work repeated. Other doctor will call back tomorrow with those results. Kody does a lot of crying while there, won't stand up. She gives us Valium for him. Don't know if I will try that. I have to feed him by hand to get him to eat dinner but after that he seems better. For the first time I let him out and when I go to check on him he is back at the front door by himself. That may just be a fluke.

Today he worries me very much, seemed to be losing ground earlier, now better. Don't know which is really the way it is. He is such a special baby and we love him so much. It's so hard when you can't even explain to them what's gone wrong with their world and why everything is upside down. You can't even be sure they understand how much you love them and will look after them no matter what.

January 3, 2007

I gave Kody the valium last night. Thought both he and I needed a good night's sleep. He did very well. I did not give him any Valium today. He has alternated between sleeping and waking fairly well. Does seem to have some trouble getting up and down though. Not sure what is going on there. He has gotten himself caught in several spots today and still does not have the

concept of “back” working. He will do it if I pull on his collar and put my foot under his belly. Otherwise he just sits down. Trying to get the house set so he can’t get in places and block himself is a task. Also remembering to keep doors shut is something we are not used to yet. He is such a gallant dog and we love him so much. If love can help then he should be all right. It’s a real emotional roller coaster, one minute he seems better, the next worse. If I only felt confident he would have a normal life span.

January 5, 2007

The last two nights have both been disruptive. Kody sleeps until 1 AM or so and then is up, very agitated wandering around for several hours. I take him into the living room to keep him away from the others and reduce the growling and general mayhem. Today we went back to the vets for the Immunology and Endocrinology blood work. \$360 but I hope it tells us something useful. He seems to move between agitation and being almost comatose. Hard to tell which state is most frightening. Vet said yesterday that the regular blood work was OK. The BUN (kidney test) is a little low, she’s not quite sure what is going on there. He has slept most of today, but did have a good bowel movement so I know that part of the plumbing is working OK still. It’s 8 PM and he needs to get up, have some dinner and walk around some. All the others are in for now. It’s hard to give them enough love, look after Kody and Ron and get the house, yard and work done too. I’m tired. Watching Kody I wonder if dogs suffer from bi-polar disorder, Tried a little web search but found nothing.

January 6, 2007

Kody slept almost all night. Woke up once and moved around just a little, then went back to sleep He doesn’t seem to want to piddle very much. This concerns us greatly. He did have another BM today which appeared OK. He walked in such tight circles that eventually he seemed to be dizzy and fell over. I try to walk next to him and keep him going straighter. We got part of the fence built in the front yard to try and keep him out of areas in which he might get hurt. Drilled a line of holes up a series of stakes, drove the stakes into the ground and then strung rope through the holes. For Kody we have 4 rows of rope. It’s soft but strong enough to keep him out. We spaced the rope so that he could not get through and set it so it was below his head and he wouldn’t get stuck. In the very odd chance that he would lower his head the ropes are far enough apart that his head won’t stick. We also put tennis balls on the tops of the stakes in order to soften the stake ends so they don’t hurt him. So far it seems to work perfectly. Hope this works long term. I will still have to stay with him but it will make it a little easier to keep him safe.

He has been very wobbly today. Also he doesn’t seem to have much appetite which doesn’t gibe with the literature on SARDS dogs. Does drink a lot of water though.

I am really frightened that something serious is wrong, besides the SARDS. Losing Kody at this age would be very hard to take. He is so close to me and such a special dog. He has always been sweet and all Newfy in personality and we love him dearly. I hope the blood work comes back soon and gives us some clues. I can’t imagine what it would be like not to have him. I need it to be many years before I lose him, my precious big boy.

A friend wants me to go to the Home Builders show in Orlando in Feb. I'd like to but it really depends on how Ron and Kody are. With Kody this way Ron sure couldn't take care of everything: work, house and all the dogs. We'll just have to see.

In the when it rains, it pours category, Brandy seems to have a case of hives. Wonder where that came from.

January 8, 2007

It's just after 5 AM and I have been watching my gallant Newfy struggle for several hours now. He's agitated and has been wondering the living room and outside. Every little possible place that he can put his nose and get stuck, he has. He has climbed in the fireplace, stuck his head under the end table, lifted it up and knocked the lamp over. We walked outside until he seemed ready to fall over. Earlier when I was asleep in the living room, he apparently went into the kitchen, slipped on the tile and fell. That time he didn't cry and when I woke up I found him asleep on the hard tile floor. I felt like I had failed to keep him safe. I wonder sometimes if he gets so agitated because he instinctively recognizes that many deaths occur in the early hours of the morning and he doesn't want that to be him.

I must get up every minute or so as I write this and pull him out of some corner he's gotten stuck in. It's strange, this has changed his personality so, at least for now. My gentle oh so tractable Newfy has become stubborn and bull headed. He only knows one direction- forward following his nose. When he hits a wall he will turn, but if there's the slightest opening to put his nose in (a corner where a bookcase stands for example) he is stuck.

We have had rain for 4 days now and so outside opportunities have been limited. It's clearing out there now, I can see stars to the north and a little west. Today is supposed to be sunny. I think if it is, the next time he gets so agitated in the daylight I will try and take him for a long walk. We haven't been in the woods for a week or more and maybe that would relieve some of the stress he's suffering. I stopped twice writing that sentence to get him "unstuck". He has finally laid down on his own and perhaps will go to sleep now. It's so peculiar that he only seems to have those two moods, agitated and almost comatose.

I fixed him freshly cooked lamb with oatmeal and gravy last night. He didn't want any of it. He had eaten some chicken dog food earlier in the day when I hand fed him. A work colleague many years ago hand fed his German Shepherd for 10 years. The dog just stopped eating out of a bowl and neither the vet nor they could ever figure out why. I guess I can hand feed Kody, if that's what it takes. If I put his nose down in the water bowl he will drink but he seems disinclined to do so on his own. I am so terrified that I am losing him and I don't know what to do. In two hours I can call the vet during normal business hours and see what they say.

It's 5:45 and he has gone to sleep finally. I must try and get a little more rest too, before the day really starts. All the others will need to go out by 7:30 or so. They are having a hard time too as there is just not enough time or energy to do much for them. Food, water, in and out with the

occasional pat is about all. Brandy needs to run, maybe today if it really is nice. Hobo needs combing, they all need their heartworm medicine.

9:30 I've decided to try and track the length of episodes of this manic-depressive state. This morning the manic phase lasted about 45 minutes. Then he slept for several hours. I didn't track the next manic phase but will start doing so. I did see him pee this time and it was in the house but it was just a dribble. I talked to Dr. and his thyroid test was low normal and his cortisol high normal. She doesn't know quite what to make of that. I'm concerned that just because it falls in the so-called normal range they will ignore the implications of it being on the edge.

12:30 He woke up and we went out to the mail box. On the way he had a BM. Looked reasonably good. He also did a very small piddle in the house this morning. Still has not eaten much. Just now we walked up the street to Jason's driveway. He did quite well, but obviously is very tired now that we are home. Gave him water to drink and lying down he did well with that. Is sleeping again now (1 PM).

9 PM He has slept most of the afternoon. Tried to feed him some treats from the Central Barkery. Not interested. Did eat some lamb this PM but not much. Received an email from Caroline Levin. Will set up a phone consultation with her as soon as I have all Kody's blood work in hand. Don't know if it will be helpful but have to try every avenue I can. Have not heard from the vet at VA. Tech yet. Hope I do eventually.

January 9, 2007

4:45 AM The latest episode of agitated behavior began about 4. It's now a few minutes after 5. I started this when he first paused and laid down but as you can see it's much later than that now. At 4 I woke up when he walked into Hobo and Bo snapped at him. He seemed still very tired so I settled him down and went back to sleep for a few minutes and I do mean a few- maybe 10. Then I heard him crying, he was trying to drag himself around the bedroom, couldn't seem to get up. He struggled into the hall where he seemed to get his legs under him again. Since then he has been walking the living room, crying, bumping into things and generally acting like he is having a waking nightmare. I gave him a little water and at one point it seemed like he wanted to poop but very little came out. Of course, he didn't eat much yesterday so I can't be sure if that's a problem or not. He's up again and I must go grab the leash so he doesn't walk into things and get stuck. That seems to work a little better at least for me. Can't quite tell if it helps him. We've walked some more since that last sentence. It is now 5:45 and I think he is finally going to go back to sleep. That makes this episode almost 2 hours too. He is so frightened and there doesn't seem to be anything I can do to reassure him. If it would do him any good I would let all the tears out. How we hurt for him. My precious, precious baby and I can't help him, I just don't know how.

Ron has a cancer checkup today and I usually go with him. I'm afraid to leave Kody. We were supposed to go to dinner in Alabama tonight but Ron will have to go without me. I just can't risk leaving him that long. Set a lunch with Phil for Thursday but that may have to go by the boards too, depending on how Kody is.

8:30 Kody is sleeping apparently peacefully and I'm exhausted still. I slept a little but am way short again.

1:15 Kody slept until almost 12:30, got up and we went out. He was very wobbly, walked around and did his BM job but his back legs would not hold him up. The stool was formed but not solid. He came back in the house and collapsed. I gave him some water, which he drank but then just dropped his nose in the bowl and would have drowned it I didn't pull it out. I keep trying to feed him but he has no interest in food. Even when I put it in his mouth it just sits there. We are losing him and I don't know why.

I am checking all the vet schools to see if anyone has any more info on SARDS. So far going alphabetically I am down to Missouri and all I can find is that one article from Iowa state that I found on a Google search. It's very general and says nothing specific. Will call Vet in a few minutes to see if results are back. My dearest boy- how am I going to save him? I feel so helpless. There must be something else wrong, but what and how do we find it?

We took Kody back to the vet this PM. They rechecked the BUN and Creatinine. Both OK. Work came back from lab and the reading Caroline Levin mentioned are high.

10:00 PM I talk with Caroline this evening. She strongly urges that I have the blood work redone at the lab in CA. It's a lot cheaper than AN-Tech. She says labs have different standards and use different reagents for the testing. We talked for quite a while. Suggested I get Kody off all grain products immediately Feed him protein with calcium supplements. He's still sleeping most of the time. Dr. thought it was just as I said, rather like he was comatose. He did get up and walk a very little bit tonight. I just hope we can get him back. He worries me so much. Don't know whether to do the Auburn thing or not. Appears all of his symptoms could be caused by the SARDS. I have found more references to loss of hearing, smell, the confusion, and all the symptoms we're seeing.

Vet suggested I give him 1/4 tablet of the Pred I have as a minimal maintenance dosage. Try every couple of days for a week. Should stimulate his appetite. Will he live? I need my baby.

January 11, 2007

Kody had a very bad night. Was confused and agitated for almost 6 hours. I am exhausted. I gave him a pred this morning. He finally fell asleep. I had to go to town to do some chores. He was up when I got home. He seems better. He has wandered around but doesn't seem as upset when he gets stuck. Has peed in the house a couple of times but I don't care as long as he's better. Walked around a lot outside when I got home. Ate some ham for dinner and seemed to like it. I still had to put it in his mouth but at least he ate. Had had a little egg this morning, but not very much. It's 8:30 PM and he's sleeping again. I will get him up in a while, take him out and hope that he will sleep tonight. I sure need to. Have gotten so few chores done around here looking after him.

January 13, 2007

He did not sleep all that much last night. Was up from about 12:30- 6:00 with a few naps in there. Most frustrating. Kody seemed a very little better today. I hope it lasts. He still acted like he was comatose when he slept but he didn't seem to be quite so agitated when he was awake. He had his second pred, cottage cheese and egg for breakfast and chicken, carrots and cauliflower for dinner. Didn't eat all that much but did drink water. I didn't see either piddle or poop but he was outside by himself for a while. Dr. called to check on him and whether we wanted to go to Auburn. I told her I thought he was a smidge better and we would see how next week went. I'm hoping very much that we will have a better night. I do need a good night's sleep in my own bed. Couch sleeping is not very comfortable. He is walking slower when he moves which keeps him from banging into so many things. Items on the Web say that dogs learn to move slower. I hope that's what's going on and not another problem. We are concerned about possible brain involvement.

January 14, 2007

Kody had a very miserable night and all day today. He is extremely restless. Slept from about midnight to 2 AM, after that it was "Katy Bar the Door" time. Had given him 2 Valium about 9:30. Around 4 AM he threw up some yellow vomit, not much in it. At 6:30 I woke Ron to watch him. I was exhausted from only 3 hours sleep. Went back to bed until a little after 9, then sent Ron back to bed. I took Kody outside and he began to walk. Would not settle down. About Noon I called the vet, went and met her at the clinic and picked up some Phenobarbitol. We'll see. She really thinks something else is going on concurrent with the SARDS. I'm not sure since I can find so little about how SARDS dogs really behave at various stages. No one on-line mentions this problem, but Caroline's literature does mention confusion and seizures which fit. His blood work doesn't seem to fit. One Ig, and Thyroid are low which is supposed to correspond with low cortisol, but his is high. Other Igs are high. Estrogen appears high but lab wasn't total estrogen, just Estradiol which tells whether a female is in heat or not. Not sure what it might signify in a male but his seems to be high. I will email Caroline tonight and also two vets that I have found on-line. Hopefully someone will answer me. Will email Dr. Herring back again too. One other item of note- he seems to have trouble eating. I have to put food on his tongue, sometimes he chews it then, sometimes it just falls out. Does not seem to have trouble drinking although he doesn't want to put his head down. By 2 when I get back from the vets he is so tired he is shaking all over. Ron has gotten him to sit down for 15 minutes, but that's all. I give him a phenobarb, finally get him to lie down, but keeping him there is a battle. He stops the shaking/trembling but still in panting and breathing very hard. Keeps trying to get up. Also been very vocal today which is unusual. Has not yet been to sleep since about 3 AM. Tried to feed him a little egg and it just fell out of his mouth. Vet thinks there is a brain problem.

9:30 PM. My baby boy is gone. Our Kody love has died. Oh how we will miss him. There's a terrible sense of unreality to this. He can't be gone, I need him too much. We brought him in the house late this afternoon and could see that he was getting much worse. His breathing was very labored and he did not want to move. We kept hoping it was because he was so tired from all the walking he did today but that was not to be. I noticed that the whites of his eyes were very red. I wonder if he was bleeding from the brain. He threw up again and it was very dark in

color. We will never know what went wrong but there is more to SARDS then is currently discussed.

And so my journey with a SARDS dog is over. It was too short. I hope that other SARDS dogs fare better then our precious Kody but I want there to be some recompense for the shortness of his life. If this record of just one SARDS dog can make a difference to another dog then he will have helped. The one thing we could not find was information about how things progressed and what was normal for SARDS. I do not know if this was the usual pattern but this is the record of our journey. May it provide help for someone and their canine love.

Postscript

I couldn't bare to leave Kody by himself Sunday night so we wrapped him in one of our bedsheets and I slept on the floor by him. Comforted me a little, even if it couldn't help him. About 3 AM got up and wrote the following to be with him when he is cremated. We will take his ashes with us to Virginia when we move so he can always be by his pond.

A Prayer for our Kodiak

May you be happy
May you be cared for
May you be whole and strong
May you remember us
Know we will miss you
Know how much we cared
Know how special you are
And most of all
Know how much you were, are and always will be loved.