

# Finding the Right Spot

By Barbara K. Yohnka

What do teaching early childhood special education, having a guide dog, and skydiving have to do with pet massage? If you're Katie Mehrtens, everything!

Katie Mehrtens, now an animal massage therapist, started her new and interesting profession after quite a few major jogs in her life journey. Katie has experienced many challenges on this journey, which she faced "sometimes with grace and acceptance and sometimes with the attitude of a screaming two-year old in the middle of a tantrum."

Diagnosed with diabetes at age three, by the time Katie was 29, the disease took a large part of her vision. She attended a school for the blind in Chicago where she learned to function as a visually impaired person. Soon after, she traveled to Guide Dogs for the Blind in California where she was assigned her new helper—Fairway. She excitedly returned to teaching early childhood special education with her new skills and her four-legged assistant.

Katie's love for animals, and her respect for Fairway as a helpmate, was evident in her classroom, which featured a wide range of animals for her children to experience. Katie said, "The animals provided wonderful learning opportunities, and animal therapy is an amazing gift."

When Fairway was about 5 years old, she became ill with a blood disease and her prognosis was grave. The vets prescribed steroids to "make her comfortable." Nonetheless, Katie was unwilling to accept Fairway's dismal diagnosis and began investigating alternative methods of treatment along with traditional care. Katie found acupuncture and a wide variety of supplements helped accelerate Fairway's recovery. This was Katie's first foray into alternative therapies for pets.

With Fairway well again, Katie shifted her focus to her own wellness and chose to undergo a pancreas transplant to try to cure the diabetes. Two attempts were made and neither was successful. "Transplants are life-changing miracles for most people, but they have varying side effects that accompany them," Katie stated. A bout of kidney disease and a number of other surgeries to deal with the consequences of the transplants followed. Katie's body desperately needed a rest.

On the road to recovery and feeling better, Katie decided to do something she had wanted to do since childhood—skydive. "It was a fabulous, life-changing experience and I wanted to do it again!" On the second jump, a freak accident occurred and Katie broke both of her legs. Her right leg broke completely in half, resulting in an open compound fracture of the lower leg. The left leg broke closer to the knee. Katie spent three months in the hospital and a rehabilitation/nursing center to adapt to living with two broken legs.

After two years, five surgeries, and many hours of physical therapy, it was time to consider returning to work. However, it became apparent to Katie that the teaching philosophy she espoused no longer meshed with the changes in the school system, so she decided to pursue a new vocation. Katie's experience with Fairway's illness, and her introduction to alternative therapies, gave her something to think about. As Fairway



*Katie Mehrtens with Fairway, her retired guide dog.*

entered her senior years, her vet recommended massage to help alleviate Fairway's sore, arthritic muscles. Katie said, "When the vet mentioned pet massage, I thought, wouldn't that be the greatest job—massaging pets!"

Coincidentally, there was an article about pet massage in the vet's office. After researching the career, Katie enrolled and began attending The Northwest School of Animal Massage in Portland, Oregon. She is now a certified animal massage therapist, and certified in dog and cat CPR and first aid.

Many people asked Katie why she ultimately chose this new profession rather than stay in the educational field. Katie said, "When you're on the right path, life flows effortlessly. When I was teaching special ed I felt that way and I feel it now doing pet massage. This is the perfect career for me. I feel as if I've been lead, perhaps not directly, but I've definitely been guided to this path which is really the right spot for me. That's why my business is called The Right Spot Pet Massage."

When Katie took classes to earn her certification in pet massage, she logged in 300 hours of study and hands-on training, similar to student teaching in education. Because pet massage encompasses every system in a pet's body, it was important for Katie to learn the animals' anatomy and physiology. She learned that pet massage can enhance the immune, circulatory, endocrine, respiratory, nervous, digestive and lymphatic systems in a pet's body. "I worked on all sizes and breeds of dogs and cats to get as much practical experience as possible," Mehrtens said.

When a person goes for a massage, he/she can tell the therapist what part of the body needs the most work. Animals can too, although they communicate their needs nonverbally. Katie explained her process is to work with the animal's owner first, asking him/her to complete a health questionnaire. Then Katie examines the pet to physically assess the animal's condition. "It may sound woo-woo to say I can "feel" an area of concern, but by palpating (which is examination by touch), I can gather a great deal of information," Katie stated. She also uses range of motion (ROM) to determine sensitive areas and the overall health of the tissues and muscles. "All of this information helps me determine the type of strokes will be most beneficial for the pet," said Katie.

Like humans, most animals not only benefit from a good massage, they enjoy it. However, it does depend on the animal's reaction to touch, just as it does with humans. For some animals, it can take a few sessions to get used to a massage, while others enjoy it immediately. Katie added, "My dog, Fairway, likes long Swedish strokes, but when I get into a sore muscle, she tries to pull away. So an animal will let me know if they're enjoying the massage—or if I came upon an area that is sensitive."

What about cats? Katie stated that most cats like massage. As a volunteer at the C.A.R.E. Animal Shelter in Evanston, Katie has massaged many cats. She said, "The ones you think will be the most reactive are often the most loving. However, with cats, it's always on their own terms!"

**For more information on pet massage, or to contact Katie, call 773-329-7233 or visit: [www.therightspotforpets.com](http://www.therightspotforpets.com).**

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