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Tallahassee writer shares tales of a therapy dog who comforts children in the courtroom.

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SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

A courtroom is intimidating, especially to a child witness.

A judge looks solemnly down from on high. A uniformed deputy wears a gun. Everyone's dressed up and staring at you. It feels like Judgment Day, and in a way, it is. Who wouldn't be frightened?

Enter Rikki "Lake Pontchartrain" Mitchell. Rikki is a golden retriever who was displaced by Hurricane Katrina and came to live at the Miccosukee Land Co-op with two remarkable animal lovers: Chuck and Patty Mitchell. Rikki is also a therapy dog who helps people. Some are ill or have disabilities. Some are children who are the victims of sex crimes. Rikki is so good with abused children, she helped inspire lawmakers to pass the nation's first statewide legislation (Ch. 2011 – 220, Laws of Florida) allowing therapy animals in courtrooms to help children who have been sexually abused.

So how does Rikki help these children? She abides with them. Speaking in the language of the heart, she silently promises this: Bury your fingers in my fur, and I will hold you here in this moment. I will not let you fall into that dark past. I will not let you slide into a scary future. And I will not abandon you."

"Rikki is extremely empathetic," says Stephanie Perkins, who manages Tallahassee Memorial Hospital's animal therapy program, one of the places Rikki and Chuck volunteer. "She has a very calming presence, she's very well mannered and she really engages with people."

You can read about some of Rikki



Only a few minutes after meeting Rikki, Zoe had mastered the "kiss" trick, holding a baby carrot between her teeth as the dog gently retrieved it. (Photo: Special to the Democrat)

and Chuck's healing sessions in "Encounters with Rikki" (Inkshares, \$18) by Tallahassee writer Julie Strauss Bettinger. The 200-page nonfiction narrative — available in January from inkshares.com, at local readings and elsewhere — has drawn high praise from reviewers.

"A wonderful read . . . told with the details that make the possibilities of therapy through animals real and will stir even a pessimist to optimism," attorney Talbot "Sandy" D' Alemberte, former president of Florida State University, wrote of the book.

Tallahassee's Dr. Armand Cognetta agreed. "An extremely moving book," said the chief of dermatology at FSU's College of Medicine. "A profoundly human journey told through the unlikely story of a canine."

In the beginning

Chuck and Rikki make a striking pair: The 63-year-old Chuck, who stands at 6-foot-3-inches and sports a crown of silver-white hair, typically rises above a crowd. Especially when 10 1/2-year-old Rikki, all liquid brown eyes and copper-gold coat, is gently wagging her tail beside him.

From the first, Perkins said, she saw their potential. Because she oversees more than 150 animal therapy teams, she's developed a second sense for recognizing an exceptional partnership. So when Mitchell got discouraged at a beginners dog-therapy workshop and left, she quickly came after him.

Chuck left after watching Rikki bare her teeth at dogs that got too close; he figured she didn't have the right

temperament for therapy work. But Perkins disagreed. Here's how Bettinger describes the moment:

" 'You don't have to leave,' Stephanie insisted. 'You can just move (Rikki) farther

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The courthouse therapy dog program has been a good fit for Rikki and chuck Mitchell. (Photo: Wade Bishop/Pets Ad Litem)

Rikki to the Rescue

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away. Give her more space at the back of the room so she doesn't feel threatened or uncomfortable around the other dog.' . . . "The back of the class, huh?" Chuck laughed. 'Well, that's where I spent most of my high school days.'

"It was a save that Stephanie would recall many times over the next few years — the story about how one of their best therapy teams almost got away."

Zoe's story

Perhaps the most dramatic story in the book is about Zoe, who was sexually assaulted by a family friend when she was 5 years old. Her case plodded through the courts for three long years. Zoe was asked to repeat

the horrific incidents again and again and was drilled with questions about it by defense attorneys.

To undergo such demands is a tall order for any little girl, including the exceptional Zoe, whom Bettinger describes as "small for her age . . . (and) such a contrast to the courtroom drama where the fate of people's lives was being decided. In the linoleum-paved courthouse hallways, she danced and twirled and fell all over Rikki. Like little girls are supposed to do."

Mitchell, meanwhile, was getting anxious about how Zoe would do in court, especially when he recalled how other children had reacted. "Rikki had been used to comfort a 13-year-old boy a few weeks earlier," writes

Bettinger, "and the child was so traumatized having to face his sexual abuser that he convulsed and vomited outside the courtroom."

But little Zoe was strong. And Rikki (with a little help from her favorite treats, baby carrots) helped Zoe get through a lengthy session of intense questioning by her abuser's attorneys.



Julie Bettinger
(Photo: Stephen Camp)

"During the 90 minutes of being asked the same questions different ways, Zoe reached her hand under the table for Chuck to fill it with a carrot," Bettinger writes. "Rikki's quiet munching added to the rhythm of the court reporter's keyboard."

It was a groundbreaking judicial event: For the first time, a therapy animal – Rikki – was allowed inside a Florida deposition. Zoe's abuser is now serving a life sentence.

"Without Rikki, (Zoe) would not have found the voice to confront her perpetrator," Perkins said. "Chuck and Rikki really embody all that we stand for."

Book signings

Want to catch author Julie Bettinger signing copies of her book "Encounters with Rikki" or meet Rikki and Chuck – or both?

Here's what's been planned so far:

Jan. 21, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., The Bookshelf, 126 Broad Street, Thomasville, GA. Extras: Will include a short talk by Chuck and Julie and visits with Rikki.

Jan. 23, 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., Hearth & Soul, 1410 Market St., Tallahassee. Extras: Visits with Rikki.

Feb. 1, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Naturally Healthy Pet, 1850 Thomasville Road (across from Jo-Ann Fabrics and Crafts), Tallahassee. Extras: Book signing includes Chuck.

ENCOUNTERS WITH RIKKI

From Hurricane Katrina
rescue to exceptional
therapy dog



Julie
Strauss
Bettinger