

Our Story

[The Beginning: Tucker](#)

Becoming a dog trainer is not something I planned to do. In April 2002, I graduated from GVSU with my MBA with a finance emphasis. Working in the insurance industry, I planned to move up the ladder into a leadership role. But my graduation gift changed the course of my life...

Born on April 8, 2002, Tucker came home to live with us in June 2002. He was a complete mystery to me. At 8 weeks old, he seemed to know exactly what he wanted, how it wanted things done, and when he wanted those things done. He was amazingly smart. In hindsight, he was exactly what and who I needed in my life. I owe my dog training career to Tucker.

Being responsible puppy owners, we signed up for Puppy School with a local trainer. Attending class was a true adventure and extremely discouraging. Tucker was dubbed the “stubborn wild man” puppy. He refused to cooperate with the trainer, ignored us half the time, and plowed over the other puppies during play.

Now, as I look back, I understand why he did these things. While there was some use of treats, for Tucker the trainer was using A LOT of leash corrections. Because he was a baby and did not understand what she wanted, he was simply getting punished and had no idea why. His frustration led to his play being overstimulated and not being able to focus on us.

I knew in my heart Tuck was a smart dog. He watched us with those wise old man eyes he had; observing and learning how we operated. I did not like the leash corrections and Tucker continued to ignore the corrections. I started researching and looking for a more effective way to train him. All we needed was basic manners; walk nicely, come when called, and stay put when needed.

My research led to me to experts Patricia McConnell, Jean Donaldson, and Ian Dunbar. Experienced, knowledgeable and effective, their training emphasizes teaching your dog to get it right and rewarding the RIGHT answer; versus punishing for getting it wrong. Coaching and teaching sounded and felt right to me. I began working with Tucker using the methodology and approaches outlined by Dr. McConnell, Ms. Donaldson, and Dr. Dunbar. And, it WORKED – quickly and effectively. Tucker really liked this new approach and was happy to learn!

[Growing: Takoda, Kirby and Learning](#)

Encouraged by Tucker's progress and seeing his need for a "buddy," we added Takoda to the family in March 2003. Takoda was Tucker's personality opposite. Tucker was stubborn. Takoda was sweet and complaint. Both dogs were always loving and loyal, but Tuck had his own way of doing things. Despite the personality differences, the training approaches I learned worked as well with Takoda as they did with Tucker. Success!

I am without a doubt, a nerd. I love to learn new things! Studying was never a burden for me, but an opportunity to expand my mind to new heights. So the success I found with training Tuck and Koda led me to want to learn more. In addition, other dog owners started asking me for advice on how to get their "naughty" dogs to listen as well as my dogs. Sharing the how to's of training dogs was fun! I enjoyed helping other people connect with their dogs and resolve problems.

Following new found passion for dogs and training, I began taking on-line courses to become a certified dog trainer. I obtained a certification after months of on-line courses, volunteer work at a local shelter, and working with a mentor assigned by the training academy. My mentor was not just a certified dog trainer; he had a PhD in zoology and animal behavior! His experience working at Sea World and Paws with a Cause were shared and valued as part of my education.

In addition, I observed other trainers, took training classes with other trainers, read more books, and watched every DVD I could get my hands on. I added training gurus such as Suzanne Clothier and Victoria Stilwell to the list of trainers above. I absorbed the knowledge on dog behavior, research, and positive training as quickly as I could find it. I was addicted!

In June 2006, with my certification and mentor training complete, Happy Tails Dog Training officially became a business! I started taking on clients and getting paid for sharing my knowledge. While I was still working full time at a 401k management firm, I was on my way to being a small business owner too! I was qualified and able to help my clients be successful, but more education was coming my way...

[More to Learn: Kirby's Training](#)

During this same time frame of early 2006, I noticed the bond between Tuck and Koda was extremely strong. Tucker was 4, Koda was 3 and they were inseparable. I started to worry if something happened to one or the other, we would lose them both. Plus, I really, really wanted another puppy of my own to train! Enter my heart boy, Kirby!

Kirby came home summer 2006. Sweet, quiet, and a bit shy, he desperately wanted to be one of the big boys. He would run along as fast as his little brown legs would carry him trying to keep up with Tuck and Koda. At first, they were not overly impressed with the little brown fur

ball. But as time went on, Kirby became one of them. Now a trio instead of a duo, Tuck and Koda took Kirby in as their “kid brother.”

Training Kirby was a true pleasure. I had a much better understanding of what and how to be successful using positive methods. Kirby was a rock star obedience dog! He listened, he focused on me, and he wanted to behave. Things were going great!

Then an event that changed Kirby and I forever occurred... A dark November evening, I was walking all three boys in our quiet suburb neighborhood. Out from between two large bushes charged a very large male Boxer. This particular dog was being rehabilitated by my neighbor for dog/dog aggression. Someone had left the gate open and out he charged. He grabbed Kirby by the scruff; and my lack of experience at the time had me absolutely freaked out!

Tuck and Koda stepped up. They both stood tall and growled at Boxer boy; who immediately seemed to realize his mistake and dropped Kirby. Fortunately, the Boxer ran off and Kirby appeared unharmed. Shaking and sick to my stomach, I immediately went back home. After I calmed down, I thanked Tuck and Koda for their bravery. All would be ok, I thought. I was wrong.

During the winter months, we saw very little of others when out walking. But when we did, Kirby started reacting with barking and growling. My sweet six month old puppy was becoming fear reactive! He would behave in what many would call an “embarrassing manner.” Lunging, barking and growling at anything and everything unfamiliar: dogs, people, cars, blowing trash, holiday decorations, and so on. Kirby was and is my heart dog. I HAD TO help him!

More research and learning for me. I educated myself on aggression, reactivity, fear behavior and how to fix these issues. My training abilities were being pushed far beyond sit-stays and come when called. I need to help my terrified dog become confident and stress-free. Working with Kirby’s issues taught me so much more than how to address aggression and fear based reactivity. I learned patience I did not know I could have, understanding for another’s state of mind being priority over my perception of things, and to be an advocate for my dog.

Working with and helping Kirby took my training career to a new level. During his process, we reached a point where he could attend group classes. In class, an experienced trainer, who had years of aggression experience, was impressed with my work with Kirby. She is a well-respected colleague and had willingly consulted with me during the early phases of Kirby’s training. Working in her classes with Kirby led to me teaching group classes for her as an independent contractor. Teaching group classes provided additional growth for me as a trainer as I continued to develop my skills.

After Kirby achieved his CGC designation, I started taking on clients whose dogs had leash reactivity issues like Kirby. And, shortly after, I left my position at the 401k firm and became a full time dog trainer. My colleague supported my decision to start teaching group classes in

my now full time training business. I was introduced to my wonderful friends at Great Lakes Hospital for animals and started teaching group classes there in 2011.

Things went along well for us for 2011 and most of 2012. I was blessed with three amazing dogs! Our relationships were growing; improving with continued understanding and spending time together. I recall saying to a friend of mine how I wished that phase in my life would simply last forever. I had Tucker, my strength, my teacher and my protector; Takoda, my quiet guardian angel, peace-keeper, and ever watchful boy; and Kirby, my heart dog, sweet and loving, and my constant side kick.

Changes: Good-byes, New Beginnings, and Stardom

As all dog people know, nothing lasts forever. No matter how much we wish it, our dogs age, get ill and pass to the Rainbow Bridge. We lost our Tucker in October 2012 to kidney failure. His passing left me with a hole in my heart that will never be filled again. I miss him every day. Every. Single. Day. But, the best way for me to honor him is to go on, and help others learn to understand their dogs. Tucker was the catalyst for my current role in life. With him in my heart, I teach each class and private lesson with passion and a determination to help others find the connection with their dog.

After losing Tucker, two dogs just seem too quiet. Spring of 2013, we decided to add another Lab to the family. Initially, we discussed another yellow. But as fate – and probably Angel Tucker – would have it, no yellows were available from our breeder. More important to us than color of the fur, was the temperament of the dog. And, our breeder has the BEST dogs. We decided on a black male. We met and decided on Quincy in May 2013. He was six weeks old when we met him and 8 weeks when he came home with us.

After 7 years of not having a puppy, WOW! You definitely develop “puppyhood amnesia” and forget over time how much work is involved. As a dog trainer, I know what is required. But living it, that’s a different thing! Quincy reminded me of the ups and downs of having a puppy. He also allowed me to improve my puppy training; making it more effective with less work for the owners.

Quincy has been a true joy! He is everything a Lab is supposed to be: fun loving, adores all people, playful and snuggly! Working with him from 8 weeks on has been an experience like no other. With the other boys, I did not have the knowledge or information or experience as I did with Quincy. Training him was actually FUN! I knew what to, how to do it, and how to tweak on the fly to adjust his learning so he was very successful.

Winter 2014 brought an amazing opportunity to our family and my training experience. Our black Labs, Takoda and Quincy, were cast in a movie being filmed here in Grand Rapids!

And, I was hired to be the on-set animal handler/trainer. I was given permission to hire an assistant trainer to help with my dogs on set. I immediately “hired” my husband Ted. His strong bond with Koda would make working on set much more successful than any other person.

Working on a film set is NOTHING like training in the real world! There are hundreds of people around all the time; lights, cameras and other equipment all over the place; and long chaotic work hours, typically 12-14 hour days (or nights). The dogs have to repeat the same behaviors over and over again, take after take. Then they have to “hang out” and wait until they are needed again for the next scene, which can be anywhere from 15 minutes to four or five hours.

During the 7 day period we worked on set, the dogs had to use long distance, off leash recalls – outside and in an unfamiliar field; a leave it behavior to ignore an entire eye level table full of burgers and fries they were not allowed to touch; and Quincy had to open a door, go into a room and interact with the actors while I was not in the room. All the daily “training” I had done with my boys was being put to the test! And I am very proud to say they were successful with all that the director asked. (To read more about our experience, check out the blog “The Dog Will Play” that I wrote and published March 2014.)

While doing the movie was a lot of work, I learned the way I live each day with my dogs, making training a part of our communication style, reaps benefits in very difficult situations. Sharing my approach with clients, advising them to make training the way they communicate, is truly effective and successful! A sad benefit to the movie is we have a wonderful final memory of Takoda, who we lost to cancer September 2014. He was not yet ill when we did the film, but was diagnosed in May. We are looking forward to the release of the movie this winter 2015 and to seeing both Takoda and Quincy shine like stars!

[Who I Am: Dog Mom and Trainer](#)

In the past 8 years, I have had the privilege of working with hundreds of dogs in the West Michigan area. Through group classes and private sessions, my work has brought me joy beyond my wildest dreams! As time as progressed, I have adjusted and improved my classes based on experience and client feedback. But the biggest changes in the curriculum occurred as I was training Quincy. The advantage of loving dogs, and seeing myself as a dog “mom” first and foremost, is what makes me the trainer I am today.

All trainers love dogs. Otherwise we would not do what we do. But in addition to loving dogs, I absolutely am passionate about helping others experience the love, joy, understanding, and mutual wonder that I share with my own dogs. Helping people brings me such a sense of purpose. My goal is to help each individual person or family find the right ways to make life with their dog(s) filled with success and love.