

Photos by Nancy Rakos



Resident Gloria Linton gives Papageno a treat.

A woman, a dog and a mission



Janet Korkor holding her book, "Puppies on Wheels," which tells the story of her daughter Gabrielle and Papageno.

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MOORESTOWN—Gabrielle Korkor knows about being different. She also knows about giving. It was midafternoon under a shining sun, when Korkor, 24, arrived at CareOne Harmony Village recently in the white van driven by her mom, Janet Korkor.

The vehicle pulled up to the front entrance of the continuing-care retirement community on Stanwick Road. Janet exited, but not before pushing buttons that automatically open the van's side doors and drop the handicapped ramp.

Descending from the metal slope with a smile as big as the moon, Gabrielle steered her motorized wheelchair onto the pathway. Janet pulled her daughter's black cardigan around Gabrielle's shoulders before they headed off to the holiday-decorated lobby of the facility.

Papageno, her white Havapoke dog is

Havapoke dog is Havapoke-Pekingese mix who wears a sash that reads "Therapy Dog 1 an' a half Pekingese." He sits snugly on Gabrielle's lap, hoodless of today's task. Within a matter of minutes, the duo would be the main feature, bringing forth giggles from residents with Alzheimer's disease.

Born on April 29, 1988, Gabrielle, who lives with her family in town, was diagnosed with mild spastic diplegia cerebral palsy shortly before her first birthday. She has difficulty walking, sitting and navigating daily life skills like bathing and eating. But what Gabrielle may lack in physical vigor, she makes up for in stark mental determination.

While bringing some joy to those with memory disorders, Gabrielle said this is her way of contributing to the world and campaigning on behalf of disabled people like herself.

"She's really like an ambassador," said Janet of her youngest child. She and her husband Ralph Korkor, 63, a surgeon, have another daughter Justin, 26. "What amazes me still is what I've learned and am still learning from her, even though she's had so many obstacles."

Just like she's been doing for the last three years, Gabrielle and Papageno (pronounced Pa pu G N o) wheeled into one of the parlors where seven women and one man were seated, some just back from the afternoon activity of ring toss.

"People should know that people with disabilities are still people," said Gabrielle. "When we go to the nursing homes, (the residents') faces light up. They go from being sad to happy."

Nancy Walsh, 82, put her knitting needles down and cuddled with Papageno, as he licked her fingers.



CareOne resident Nancy Walsh plays with the therapy dog.

Papageno is named for the loyal bird catcher referenced in one of Gabrielle Korkor's favorite operas, Mozart's "Magic Flute."

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"His nose is cold, so he must be in good health," said Walsh, happily.

"Gloria, Papageno is here to see you today. Do you remember him?" said Gabrielle to Gloria Linton, 81, dressed in a purple pantsuit, who was decorating a gingerbread house with gumdrops.

"I used to have a boxer named Jumbo," said Linton smiling, as she rubbed Papageno's ears. "I have a picture of him in my room."

Janet was 26 weeks into her pregnancy when Gabrielle was born weighing 1 pound, 14 ounces, a micro-preemie, no bigger than an adult's hand. Janet had developed placenta previa, a condition that causes the placenta to lie low in the uterus.

For four months, Gabrielle stayed in the hospital, and it became clear that something was wrong. She remained on oxygen, and didn't reach infant milestones, such as rolling over and lifting her head. She's endured countless surgeries, some very serious, beginning when she was 18 months old.

In 2005, she had a total spinal fusion at Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del., a surgery lasting many hours to insert rods into her back. It was during her six-week stay at the Ronald McDonald House of Delaware that Gabrielle became smitten with the therapy dogs visiting the center.

"I told my mom that if I got better, I wanted to do that," recalled Gabrielle.

Janet remembers just hoping that Gabrielle would get through the recuperation.

In 2008, they adopted Papageno, his name a bit of a tip to the loyal bird catcher referenced in one of Gabrielle's favorite operas, Mozart's "Magic Flute."

Her last major surgery was performed in January 2012 to correct abdominal problems. It was the first time that Gabrielle and Papageno—when Gabrielle and Papageno were separated for such a lengthy time—were reunited.

"My sweet little girl that Papageno would never leave me, and he would be every day," said Gabrielle. "I had a huge anxiety, wanting her to be home and to be with me."



Janet Korkor (right), and her daughter, Gabrielle, holding Papageno in her lap, talk with residents of the Moorestown facility.

Her activism encouraged her, with her mom's help, to write the children's book "Puppies On Wheels," the story of Gabrielle and Papageno's journey as volunteers.

Janet said that although she is just 18 months post-surgery, Gabrielle was fortunate in winning the bid, which was sold for \$1,400. Books have no publication date.

"I'm just glad the people that

she wanted this to be a story that little kids could learn the proper ways to understand disabled and aging people," said Janet, 54, a thoughtful woman with a kind disposition.

She also made sure to give her stamp of approval on the theme song done by Jeff Galloway of Newsmix Pa. Gabrielle and the team's slow-gait made her look like a pro.

"I hope she'll talk to me sometimes, or

though I'm a child, and I'm not," said Gabrielle.

Janet said the struggle to balance Gabrielle's care with a desire to have her and as normal a life as possible can be challenging, although they've survived throughout her budding art and design.

"We're a team, right Gabrielle?" said Janet of Gabrielle's past and future. "I love her, and she loves me."

"Do you feel well enough to go to the eye doctor?" Janet then asked Gabrielle. Earlier that morning, Gabrielle had felt nauseous from the anesthesia that she's been taking since her surgery almost a year ago.

"And...uh...yep," Gabrielle said as she patted her stomach around with her hand. Papageno was sitting on her lap, and she was holding her.

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