

Opinion: From death comes a new best friend

By Kathryn Reed

Five years ago today one of the saddest and what turns out to be best things happened. My friend **Joy died** and her dog became a member of my family.

When Joy was diagnosed with cancer the previous fall one of the first things she did was ensure AJ's future. I tried to avoid the conversation, but Joy wouldn't have it. And, really, how could I? Her strength to have this most difficult discussion was the prelude to nearly a year of moments that made me admire my friend even more. She taught me how to die with grace and dignity.



Joy and AJ

AJ was Joy's 9-year-old dog. Her baby. Her child. This part

greyhound, part yellow Lab and part things we don't know was her companion.

The three of us would walk on occasion. AJ provided me with my dog fix since at the time I was dog free.

That last year of Joy's life I became AJ's primary dog walker. Joy told me AJ soon recognized the sound of the Jeep pulling into the driveway and would get excited. (She still does.) Sometimes the three of us walked, but in the last months it was just me and AJ.

I miss those walks – the three of us. I miss my friend more than I ever imagined, and love this dog of ours more than I thought possible.

It took me a while to consider myself AJ's mom; somehow doing so seemed to diminish the memory of Joy. But I know Joy wanted me to be mom; and that brings me comfort.

I remember the first time AJ got into my Jeep. She sat on my lap as we drove. We were going for her mani-pedi as Joy called it. AJ knew it was just a nail trim. She didn't look back at Joy – which I heard all about. But she also made driving down Highway 50 a bit challenging. I finally got her into the passenger seat.

Now she is a regular there. I often take her on errands with me. I'm not sure which one of us wants the company more.

It wasn't an easy transition for AJ. She had become Joy's protector, not wanting people to get close – especially as Joy spent more time in bed. AJ transferred that protection to me. This wasn't good.

I enlisted the help of Karenina with Dogs with Issues for some training sessions. AJ was softening and at the same time starting to have a firm grasp of my heart.



Hiking to Winnemucca Lake in 2015.

Joy wasn't AJ's first mom. We don't know what abuse she may have endured that led her needing to be rescued.

She still has issues. She doesn't like other dogs in her house; doesn't even really like them in their home. She can be temperamental on occasion. And she really doesn't like men in sandals or flip flops.

AJ sleeps on my bed now; something I had never allowed a dog to do. She even uses a pillow. On special occasions or when I'm feeling sad or there's thunder she's invited onto the couch. (This is our little secret.)

I have more pictures of AJ than any human family member or friend. I've stopped thinking it's weird to have a dog as a best friend.

She's 14 now. That's how old my last dog lived to. She's smaller than Bailey, so I'm hoping there's a few more good years ahead of us. There are too many hikes I want to go on, too many bunnies and squirrels for her to chase, too much life to still share.

Sometimes we talk about Joy; we even talk to Joy. I thank my friend all the time for AJ. That's not to say I wouldn't rather have my friend be alive, and for AJ to be with her. But

clearly that's not going to happen.

On this anniversary of Joy's death, I will smile at knowing she knew what she was doing when we had that difficult conversation, then I'll hug and kiss on AJ and be thankful for the gift my friend gave me.

AJ (Audrey Jean) is proof that something magical can come from something so sad. It took me a while to appreciate that. The circle of life is quite powerful.