Bailey, Phoebe and Sunny

October 3, 2008 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Bailey is my Toy Fox Terrier. I don't remember exactly when this picture was taken, but she was about four months old. She turns four years old this month. (Time does go by fast!) Although Bailey will never be able to understand why, I'm indebted to her. Pets are literally lifesavers for many people and I am no exception.

My cat Phoebe was a wonderful example. I got her from an animal shelter in 1994 when I was in a major clinical depression related to being in the closet about being gay and HIV positive. So I didn't listen carefully enough to the shelter volunteers who stared at me in disbelief when I told them that I wanted her. "Are you sure?!" I must admit that their attempts to dissuade me were not unwarranted.

Phoebe was crazy. Not friendly to people and aggressive to other animals, I had my hands full with her. My roommates and other friends helped me socialize her. We succeeded to the point of having her not scratch us randomly and even seeming to not mind a pat on the head.

Despite all the trouble she caused in her lifetime, I'm here today in part because of the annoyance (and joy) of living with her. Phoebe gave me a reason to think about something other than myself at precisely the time when I needed to do that the most.

My childhood mutt Sunny was my first dog. I was a sensitive child, so having a dog to play with and take care of did wonders for my self esteem. Unknowingly at the time, my family and I did everything wrong in her training. I vowed that if I had another dog, I would make sure that training was a priority. That brings me back to Bailey.

When my ex-partner and I brought her home, Bailey was given love but also discipline. The combination paid off splendidly. Pets give us emotional support, but the benefits are directly tied to how much we give back to them.

Click here to read "Doggone It" from the August 2006 issue of POZ by Shari Margolese, who recounts how her dog Elsie helped her son learn about living with HIV.

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