***My Story***

 My family and I made the decision to get a dog in 2004. My 2 daughters and my husband wanted a dog several years prior to that, but I put the brakes on getting one. I knew it would primarily be my responsibility and I simply wasn’t ready to embark on that journey. I was receptive to looking at all the different breeds to find one that we all agreed on. We basically made our decision based on looks, not temperament. More on this topic later….

When I was ready for a life as a dog owner, we all decided on a Pembroke
Welsh Corgi because of how cute they are. We tried searching for an AKC approved breeder, but there were no Corgis available in the color we wanted and without having to travel hundreds of miles. So, we did what everyone advised against doing and that was to answer an ad in the newspaper. This was the equivalent to finding a dog on Craig’s list. I agreed to go see the puppies first and had everyone promise me that we would not bring a puppy home. This was not a decision I wanted to make on a whim and be overcome with feelings of cuteness that would influence my decision-making process. I had done some research on how to select reputable breeders and knew we should be allowed to see the entire facility and even meet both the mother and father of the puppies that were up for adoption.

 We travelled about an hour to see what we were getting ourselves into. I give my daughters and husband a lot of credit. They stuck to the promise we made. We did not come home with a puppy. We all were able to hold 3 Corgi puppies, who were all absolutely adorable, so we could choose which one we liked the most. I was impressed with the breeder because she recommended all but one of them. He was too feisty and didn’t pass the temperament test. She interviewed all of us, showed us her entire facility, and answered all our questions. The next weekend, we returned to pick up “Green” whom we renamed Hank.

Everything went as well as could be as far as having Hank accept his new home. We dealt with the typical puppy issues like nipping, jumping, potty training, and crate training. Prior to Hank, both my husband and I had dogs in the family, but we were not solely responsible for them. You could say we were first time dog parents.

 I wanted to learn everything I could about having a dog so I could do everything right. I started to look for puppy classes for Hank when he was 4 months old because I heard that’s what you should do. I would later find out that what dog trainers consider to be the “right” method is very subjective. One trainer used bitter apple spray directly into the puppies’ mouth as a form of discipline. Her philosophy was when the puppy experiences the unpleasantness of the spray, which causes its’ mouth to foam up, the puppy will remember not to repeat that particular behavior. We tried to do this when we got home, but something didn’t feel “right” about that form of discipline. Subsequently, we did not continue with that trainer.

Upon a recommendation from a friend, I signed up for a 12 week training program. This dog trainer’s method was to use a type of choke collar that was made out of rope, instead of a chain. Every time the puppy misbehaved, we were to yank on the collar. If he didn’t listen, we were to yank harder. In one of the lessons, Hank was at the water dish getting a drink. Another dog approached the dish and Hank growled at him. Both the trainer and I saw this happen. She asked me if I should tolerate that behavior. I told her I thought that was just something dogs did and it was typical. She told me that it is something dogs do but it should not be tolerated. She asked me if she would like me to have her handle it next time. I told her to please show me how I should handle this if it happens at home. She proceeded to set the water dish up again. Hank fell for the ploy, exhibiting the same behavior. Right away, the trainer grabbed his leash, lifted him straight up and shook him from side to side and then slammed him down on the pavement. I was horrified, but then thought, if this is what I have to do, I will do it. I did not want an aggressive dog. My daughters were 10 and 12 years old and I didn’t want anyone in my family to get bit. I was instructed to do this procedure every time Hank was trying to challenge me. Even though it didn’t feel right, I complied with the trainer’s instructions. However, what I was discovering was that Hank was not very sensitive to this approach. Instead of becoming more submissive, he became more aggressive. I was also raising my voice and becoming more and more enraged with him as I was in communication with him. This is not the type of person I am with humans, but he was really “yanking my chain”! It became a vicious cycle I did not know how to break. What ended up happening was I developed a very aggressive dog.

I wish I knew then what I know now. I made many mistakes, one of them being, I should have consulted a professional. Hank was still very young. He could have learned an alternate behavior quite quickly. I was so gun shy with dog trainers, I thought I could do it myself. Mistake number two! My lack of knowledge of dog behavior coupled with very poor timing of my corrections, led to even more dominant behaviors. Soon, Hank was guarding his toys, our shoes, even his own body. None of us could get within a foot of his possessions without him showing his teeth at us. We could barely even pet him. This isn’t what we all signed up for, but I was never going to give up.

I was telling my Mom all about Hank one day and she asked me if I ever saw the show, “The Dog Whisperer”. I thought I saw him, Cesar Millan, on Oprah one day. I started tuning in. I was amazed at the way he handled all types of dogs and desperately wanted him to come to Cleveland. Boy, did I have a case for him! He talked about exercise, discipline and affection, in that order. He also said to take a look at yourself before you blame the dog. I considered myself a very calm and assertive person, I just wasn’t with my dog. All I wanted to do was yell at Hank. I didn’t realize that it is this exact energy that dogs tune out. They only want to follow calm and assertive leaders.

About 4 years into this whole “dog thing”, I was only walking Hank when it worked into my schedule. I used to walk my girls to school with him, but he was horrible on the leash. He just pulled and pulled until my arm gave out. This made me more determined to make it work. I started walking him every day, but just once a day. He seemed to get scared at every noise, especially busses and garbage trucks. Sometimes he would be so scared that he would come back home shaking. He wanted to hide. All I could do was put my hand on him and hope that my calm energy would flow through to him. It worked a little.

 One day, I thought all the garbage had been picked up in North Olmsted. We set out for our walk. About a mile into the walk, up pulls a garbage truck and parks right in front of us. The front dumpster flipped up creating a huge bang and Hank just flipped out. I turned my back to the garbage truck, exhaled loudly, and sent a prayer out to the universe asking for some relief for Hank and for myself. What followed shocked me. I couldn’t process it until I got home. I had watched enough Cesar Millan to know what really happened. It was all me! When I turned around and gave my back to the garbage truck, that was a form of surrender in dog language. When I exhaled loudly, I became calm. When I sent my prayer out, I lifted my head up. That is body language for being assertive. I knew I had a job to do and that was to get back home without carrying Hank. Guess what? Hank just followed me all the way home!

From that day on, our walks started becoming better. I started to relax. I was no longer getting frustrated at Hank. He started to relax. I was able to show him exactly where I wanted him when we walked – right by my side. I even sent him a clearer message and wanted him a little behind me. I no longer wanted him to think he was leading me on our walks. Things were improving, at least on our walks.

Then, one weekend, I was out of town. My daughter, who was about 18 years old, was attaching Hank’s leash to his collar. He turned around and charged aggressively at her and bit her on her arm. My husband told me emphatically that we either find the best dog trainer in town, or we get rid of Hank. There was no way I was getting rid of Hank. I had already invested almost 8 years in trying to figure him out. So, I found a great dog trainer, named Scott. He was the impetus for two things: I realized issues that still existed with Hank which I never addressed, and I wanted to have a job like Scott’s! He told me I had to start walking Hank twice a day, every day, no excuses. I also had to change the way I fed him and make him work for his food. I had to set more boundaries and limits in the house. I had to follow through with every command I gave him. This is exactly what Cesar Millan was demonstrating in all of his shows. I was starting to get it.

It was at this time that I started to look for a job as a dog trainer. I was hired by Petco and went through their positive reinforcement dog training program. Within 6 months, I started teaching classes on my own. Everything I learned at Petco, I tried out on Hank. It worked! Even I was more pleasant when dealing with Hank! I started getting the respect I had so desperately wanted. I realized how negative I was whenever I was in communication with him and how rarely I praised him. I heard Cesar Millan’s words in my head, “Remember, dogs live in the present. Don’t worry about yesterday. They have already moved on. It’s us humans who create stories of the past and make them our present.” So, I knew I couldn’t feel guilty for the previous 8 years. Again, that kind of energy is not the energy of a true leader. I had to make a new story.

Hank did not change overnight, even with my new positive reinforcement techniques. I had to master that calm and assertive energy. I had to show Hank that my new job was to be his leader and prove to him that he didn’t need to do that job again. I used a lot of treats to shape the behavior I was looking for. What this did was make all my interactions with him fun and it was obvious he wanted more. He could also start to trust me. I no longer was giving him tugs on his collar to make him listen to me. Seriously, who would like being tugged on all day long? That’s enough to drive any of us over the edge.

With that being said, it is imperative to talk about discipline. Just like with our children, they need to learn when they are not behaving correctly. Hopefully, we do this through the time-out process and not through spanking. A spank can come down too hard and only instills fear in the child. Same goes for the dogs. Of course, I would never condone what the dog trainer did to Hank during his training class. We know now how that turned out. An alternate form of discipline is less threatening, less likely to do harm, and will not affect the trust your dog has in you. I put Hank in a down position from a standing position when he needs to be disciplined. This is a submissive position for a dog. You can give them a little push so they roll on their side. This is even more submissive for the dogs. However, this can be tricky with a more dominant dog that doesn’t want to submit. Your chances of getting bit are greater when you put your hands on the dog. That’s why I am a proponent of the simple down position. I stand right by the dog with calm, but assertive energy until the dog has calmed down. There is no time limit on this. I want to stress this: You can’t be in a hurry when disciplining your dog. If your dog breaks the down-stay, he needs to repeat the behavior. This can be difficult when you start to implement this. The dog is not used to it and will not quite understand what you are trying to accomplish. Just as you need to reward your dog within 1-2 seconds of doing the behavior you are requesting, so should you discipline your dog within 1-2 seconds of doing the undesirable behavior. This was my biggest problem for years when I disciplined Hank. I was always too late. He had already forgotten what he did and he thought he was getting disciplined for just standing in place, hence, the buildup of the mistrust he had in me.

To return to a previous topic of selecting the type of dog you want, we chose Hank based solely on his looks. There is a reason why Corgis are on so many ads for pet store supplies! Those big ears, short legs, and do I even have to mention that Corgi butt! All cuteness aside, I can’t stress enough how important it is to select the dog that is right for you and your family. The energy level, not the physical attributes, should be your number one priority when selecting a dog. Most dogs have a lot more energy than we do and require that energy to be drained daily. In addition to this, dogs like Huskies, Border Collies, and Australian Shepherds have even more energy than most dogs. So, I go one step further, and recommend daily structured walks to communicate your leadership skills to your dog, as well as drain their energy. I have seen too many situations where the energy and temperament did not match the pet parent’s energy and temperament. Consequently, the dog becomes out of balance, exhibits destructive behavior, and is returned to the breeder or shelter. This really isn’t fair to any dog.

To sum this all up, my relationship with Hank started to improve once I realized several things and started to change the way I communicated with him. I understood the power of positive reinforcement, I mastered the calm and assertive energy, I implemented exercise, discipline and affection in that order with the correct timing, and followed through on my newly established, clearer boundaries. You could say I was on the 8 year plan! My desire is to share my message and knowledge with fellow dog owners so they can live with their canine companions in a balanced way.

When you sign up for Canine Concierge dog training services, you will not only learn how to train your dog, but you will also learn how to understand your dog’s behavior so that you can fulfill his or her needs. I provide a personal touch by staying in contact with my clients long after training concludes because I realize that issues arise as dogs mature. This is why I will continue to offer services that will speak to dog’s body, mind, and spirit like my weekly Sunday pack walk. We gather at Elmwood Park, in Rocky River, walk in the woods for a half hour, followed by a half hour of simple obedience training in the parking lot. I am also working on an agility course with a frisbee catching contest! Over the years, I have found that people love their dogs and want to keep them socialized with people and dogs over their lifetime. Stay tuned for new and exciting events and classes!