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Subject: How It All Began

Below is a reminiscence of how my life started as a dog lover in loving memory of Ziggy.  
September, 1975.....

I recently graduated nursing school, got a brand new car, I got my first own apartment, got the job I wanted as a nursery nurse - life was good, in fact, great! How could it get any better?? I decided to get my very first dog!! Our apartment, as I was growing up, did not allow pets. Now I could find an apartment that did. Blindly, I went to the local pet store and told them I wanted a little dog. Somehow, I don't remember the exact circumstances, but they told me they would order me a Maltese, whatever that meant. A week or two goes by, and I get a call that "my dog is in". All I needed was the money!! I don't think I even received my first paycheck yet, and he had come in earlier than I was told. No one knew I was getting a dog. So, on a Saturday morning, I went to my parents and told my Mother I needed \$100.00 (well it was only 1975!!) NOW, but I couldn't tell her why. I wanted to surprise everyone with my bundle of joy. She thought I was in trouble, something I had never been in before, but never the less, she gave me the money with no further questions asked. An hour or two later, when she opened her door, a very tiny ball of white fur came running to her, her first grandson. Since I was a big fan of the cartoon, Ziggy, and this little fur-ball was equally all white, that became his name. Now life was perfect - honestly it was truly the most exciting month of my life!

Ziggy, Ziggy, Ziggy was maybe 2 lbs at the time, and I was totally new at this puppy Mommy thing. Needless to say, Zig was not one of the best trained dogs in the world. He shared my life at a time when I was out more than home, between work and social life. I fed him all the wrong people foods. In fact, he was such a coffee addict that he would bark when the coffee was ready if a cup was not immediately poured for him!! Do you believe I actually gave my dog coffee? Sad to say that wasn't the worst of it. Ziggy was spoiled to pieces, and I took him everywhere I could. He had a few behavioral problems however, to put it mildly. As soon as he saw my white stockings come out, he knew I was leaving for work, and would quietly go as far under the bed as possible and pee!! At one point, my best friend, Carmela, decided to become my roommate. We found some apartments to go look at, and of course, Ziggy came. I'll never forget walking away from my new blue Gremlin with the denim seats (this was the 70's, folks), to check out an apartment, only to see sweet little Ziggy pooping and peeing his brains out all over the car. Since we weren't certain if dogs were permitted here, Carmela and I just ignored him so the rental person (nicknamed by us Mrs Wallington, after the town) would not notice. Ziggy was not one to be left behind, and he was trying to make that perfectly clear. He traveled on vacations with me, when we could drive to it. He was there through the ups and downs of dating and breaking up. He put up with my long hours out with friends after work, my ignorance regarding his dietary needs, my stumbling as a Mommy. He wore a tuxedo for my wedding. No, they wouldn't allow him in the church or the banquet hall, but he was photographed by our wedding photographer at our home. He loved his 2-legged step-sister, Beth, and had to be right by her side whenever she visited. He had several health problems over his short life, including knee surgery. I think the worst part of that was his beautiful hair being shaved, and his refusing to pass my mirror without looking depressed. He was vain, but after all he was told daily how perfect and handsome he was. I was so crazy about him that I told him he was Mommy's respirator, the reason I could breathe. The epitome of co-dependence, but no one ever loved me like he did. His biggest health issue was his heart, very common in the Maltese breed. On July 25th, 1985 he turned 10 years old. My roommate and I had a party for him, and we all sat and watched the movie "Mrs Doubtfire" with Robin Williams. Two days later, on the 27th, I came home to find him struggling to breathe, and rushed him to my vet's home office at midnight. Meanwhile, his Daddy, Jim, was hospitalized with major kidney surgery in NYC. Due to my sadness and worry about Jim, friends convinced me to go out to dinner with them after work that eve so I got home very late. If only I had come home when I should have.

Sound familiar?? Maybe this is why many years later I agreed to talk about Guilt and Pet Loss at the APLB Conference. I knew what it felt like first hand. I never thought there was the slightest chance of Ziggy dying. Especially not at just 10! I've never watched Mrs. Doubtfire again, and still don't know if I could. Funny the things that trigger us.

Ziggy was many things in my life, but most importantly he opened my eyes to the world of dogs. My love and experience with him was so great, that I just want to keep doing it again and again. With each dog that has become a member of my family, a piece of the credit goes to the ones before them. When Ziggy died I had very little support. As I've said many times in Friends of Nikki meetings, I stuffed my grief because I didn't know how to feel it, and was embarrassed by it. No one I knew had expressed grief for an animal companion. I had no one to tell me it's normal, just those who wanted to know if, and when, I was getting another one. I couldn't hear a dog bark, or see one without crying. Even though I didn't really talk about it or do anything positive to move through it, the pain was there so strongly as the holidays were approaching. I guessed everyone was right, and I must get another dog before Christmas, because I just couldn't stand the pain of being without him. He was taken so quickly, and unexpectedly. As many of you know, I did get another dog by Christmas, and her name was Nicole Kimberly (a.k.a. Nikki). This is how it all began, and the rest is history.

As I remembered Ziggy Friday, on his 39th birthday, and again today on his 29th anniversary in Heaven, I thank him for sharing whatever time, no matter how short by my standards, with me in his physical body. His spirit lives on forever, especially all the funny memories he left me with. May each of you remember a special companion, and thank him or her for what they've given, in memory of my sweet little "Zigfried".

Thank you for listening.  
Donna