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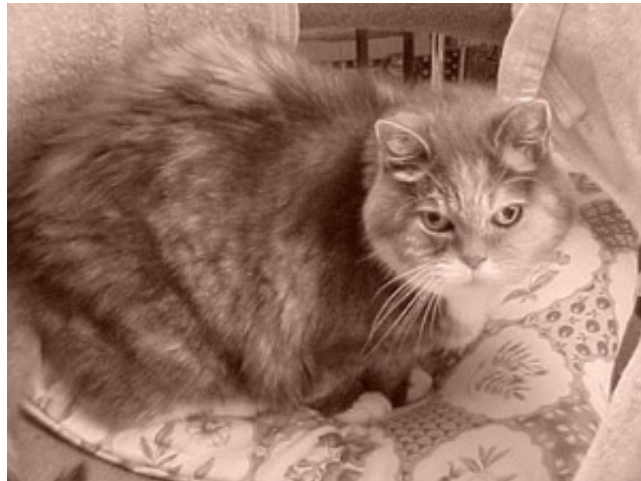
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JELLO

by Diane Grindol

In the beginning

It is Sister Judy Seefeld, an Adrian Dominican Catholic nun, who has arranged transportation, food and lodging for Jello through the years and originally lined up her therapy work. From the time Sister Judy first got to know Jello, she noticed that she was especially friendly and gentle. Sister Judy thought she should be sharing her with other people, somehow. In 1996 she was at the Hospice to return some materials she was using in her classroom, where a student had a brain tumor that would eventually claim her life. Sister Judy mentioned to one of the



hospice administrative staff that she had a cat and would like to do something to share her with people who would appreciate her special loving qualities.

The Hospice administrator responded, "We have a pet program here that was popular, but the participant numbers have dwindled. If you think Jello would be a good therapy cat, bring her in so I can meet her." Sister Judy's heart skipped a beat. This was the opportunity she had hoped for. Jello had an interview in short order, and eschewing all propriety, jumped up on the desk to meet her new "boss." The administrator fell in love with Jello, who had all the glowing attributes that Sister Judy had described. There wasn't any hesitation about signing Jello up as a therapy cat. Sister Judy started to work on the paperwork required for Jello to be at Hospice regularly. She needed a physical to bring her vaccinations up to date and a letter from her veterinarian stating that she was free from disease.

Within a couple weeks they started their visits. There wasn't a training program for Jello's new position, so at first the Activity Directory accompanied Jello as she went to a few rooms. Sister Judy, pulling a patient Jello behind her in a red wagon, learned to introduce herself and

announce that she had a cat with her, would the room occupants like to visit with her? Of course those who were allergic declined to visit and there were a few self-professed “dog people” who didn’t care to spend time with a cat. Once the latter met Jello, many started to appreciate her charms and their resistance melted away.

In the first years that Sister Judy and Jello made their weekly visits to Hospice, all of the people in the rooms were cancer patients. In the year 2000 the local hospital purchased the Hospice and started also admitting patients for orthopedic rehabilitation. Over the years Jello trolled the halls in her red wagon, a shopping cart that was often decorated for the season, and a baby buggy.

Sister Judy is convinced that Jello makes a difference to the patients she visits. She quietly listens to their stories and calms their fears. One Russian woman was called “Grandma” by the Hospice staff. Following a stroke as well as cancer, she wore a bright yellow scarf on her head. The staff wanted to encourage Grandma to use her gnarled hands, but they weren’t meeting with any success. She wanted to see the cat, though. Nurses put her hand on Jello’s soft fur. The useless hand would slide off of Jello repeatedly. Finally, Grandma managed to pat Jello and work 2 fingers well enough to hold on to her fur so that her hand would not slide. Sister Judy and the nurses started to cry.

A friend in need

Jello’s biggest challenge of her life came when Sister Judy needed Jello at a time when Jello was having health issues of her own. In the spring of 2003, Sister Judy noticed that Jello, now about sixteen years old, was losing weight. When Sister Judy petted her, her hip bones protruded through her normally plump body. She could also see that Jello was drinking a lot of water. It was time for a trip to see a veterinarian. Sister Judy was afraid of what could be wrong with her very special cat, who admittedly was getting up there in cat years.

Jello had kidney disease and was kept at the animal hospital for 3 days when they went in to their veterinarian. A series of blood tests were done while Sister Judy stopped by to see poor caged Jello every day. Jello’s huge green eyes were dull but visits by her favorite person perked her up. She looked so pitiful in the small cage where she spent these days. Two weeks later more blood tests were run and showed some improvement. Sister Judy was trained how to offer Jello supplemental fluids, went home on a prescription kidney diet and special dry food.

Jello did regain some of the weight she had lost, and after her daily fluid treatments would feel perky. She would never recover, but Sister Judy worked out a way to maintain her for the time being despite the kidney disease. Jello slept a lot of the time, now, suddenly seeming to reach a sleepy old age.

Then Sister Judy broke her leg while she was at a house caring for a little dog. At first she was in great pain as well as being concerned for her cats’ care. A neighbor and friends stepped in to make sure the 3 cats at her house had food and clean litter boxes, and that Jello received her daily fluids. Sister Judy’s convalescence would be eight weeks long. The experience of being helpless to move from her bed at the convalescent hospital where she was to recuperate was frightening. The sounds of the hospital and the comings and goings of staff and patients

were unsettling. Added to Sister Judy's worries about her broken leg and recovery were her worries for Jello's health. She wasn't absolutely sure that Jello would make it through her recovery time. She prepared herself mentally for losing her closest friend. On Sundays a friend or client started to bring Jello to visit Sister Judy. Jello brought her own brand of medicine to her human friend while seeming to soak up the attention lavished on her also. Jello purred, curled up on or beside Sister Judy. Sister Judy stroked and spoke to her companion, the two of them finding the kind of solace in each other's company that they had provided to countless Hospice patients through the years.

Jello has survived to see her master come home from the hospital and get back her independence. Sister Judy, with the help of Jello the therapy cat, has a mended leg and a cat still in stable condition.

Pet therapy rounds at the hospice

There's a gentle knock on the door at the Hospice, and a voice says "Hello, I'm Sister Judy, would you like a visit with my cat?" From the other side of the door comes a robust voice, "Yes, come in!" and then upon seeing the visitors, "Oh my, a cat!"

Sister Judy introduces her feline friend, "This is Jello," and "Dennis," the patient, looks into Jello's big green eyes and intones sweetly, "Jello, Jello sweetie Hi, Jello!" Jello goes on to serve her particular gentle ministry of curling up next to the bed-bound patient and accepting some gentle stroking. She looks the patient in the eyes, then sniffs her surroundings, fusses with blankets a little, turns around to position her body in a comfortable way, then settles down with her front paws tucked out of sight. Jello is settling in for a catnap.



"What kind of cat is she?" asks Dennis. Sister Judy answers, "She's a pastel calico, part Persian and part something else." Then, curious patients want to know, "How old is she?" Again Sister Judy responds, patiently, "She's 18 years old. I got her from the SPCA."

Jello is a kitty with a job. This gentle pastel calico cat with piercing green eyes has a regular gig at the Hospice of the Monterey Peninsula. She has an accepting, caring soul and has quietly curled up with the ill and ailing for many years. She has always provided a special brand of therapy for cat lovers. Hospice patients appreciate Jello's visits and often marvel, saying "My cat would never do that," as they watch Jello being wheeled down the hall from room to room, accepting pats and admiration from staff and patients alike. In 2003 Jello had her most important assignment. While battling a debilitating kidney disease herself, she was instrumental in her owner's recovery from a broken leg.

Jello's entrance at Hospice does not go unnoticed. "Hi Jello" says the attendant at the front desk, as she remarks that "Not many cats come out for pet therapy. When they do, they come in carriers." Jello rides proudly in a walker with a seat on which she can perch. "Hello Sister Judy and Jello" comes a greeting from down the hall. Sister Judy, dressed casually and quietly

attending to business in the shadow of Jello, spends some time in the foyer, which is where she picks up a list of room numbers with patients who have requested a visit by a cat this week. The patients reside in one of 2 wings of the facility, and Sister Judy heads off towards the nurse's station of the wing housing those recuperating from leg surgeries.

Many of the patients in this wing do physical therapy, and so they're out and about with nurse's aides to get their prescribed walking for today. Sister Judy doesn't even make it to the nurse's station before an obvious cat lover stops her. Maxine is wearing a cat sweatshirt and gushes over Jello, "Aren't you sweet. Look at that face!" "Yes," responds Sister Judy, "Jello knows she's cute and she knows she makes people happy!" Maxine, obviously smitten by Jello, continues "She's darling. Look at her cute little paws, she has white paws." "Would you like a visit with Jello and me in your room?" asks Sister Judy. The answer is obviously yes, and Sister Judy takes note of Maxine's room number to make sure that they'll be visiting her today.

Finally making it to the nurse's station, Sister Judy settles in at a desk to do some background research. She finds the records for each of the patients she is to visit today. She has a room number on her paperwork, and looks up a name. She double checks that they aren't allergic to cats and gets an idea of the reason they are at Hospice. When she needs help deciphering medical records, there are aides, nurses and doctors she can ask. This is all confidential paperwork, and Sister Judy turns it in to the activity director at the end of each day after she makes visits to patients. As she goes along, she notes the response of the patient to Jello from "patient sleeping" to "nice visit with Jello – 5 minutes;" or in the case of Maxine, "met patient in hallway."

Not everyone on staff at Hospice has met Jello, but many know of her from her reputation or from her calling card on the Hospice bulletin board. "There's Jello," comes from someone who would like to make her acquaintance. Jello socializes while Sister Judy attends to business as best as she is able.

When her paperwork is in order, Sister Judy steps out with Jello to visit rooms assigned to them today. They steadily make their way down the hall. Sister Judy knocks at room 2. "Hello, this is Sister Judy. Would you like a visit from a cat today?" Here a nurse's aide answers that the patient is sleeping after some pretty rigorous physical therapy. They move on. "Hello, Sheila, may I come in?" "Yes. Oh, aren't you cute! You are a sweetheart" says Sheila as she spies Jello. Sister Judy, from the doorway, asks if Sheila would like to visit with a cat today? "No Sister, I'm sorry you can't come in here. You see, my Scottie dog is allergic to cats and he's been coming to visit me." The two women banter a little about pets, cats and physical therapy. Then Sheila says, "Good-bye. I'm so glad you're helping out at Hospice."

In the next wing, where Hospice provides a safe and nurturing environment for people in the final days of their lives, Sister Judy once again stops at the nursing station. She goes by a room where she visited a woman who was near death last week. This week the family is gathered outside her room and lets her know that Jello doesn't need to visit today.

Jello has been in the position of fulfilling the last wishes of her patients. The Hospice receptionist called Sister Judy one night to tell her a woman with cancer wanted to hold a cat before she died. The woman's husband was in the room when Sister Judy arrived and lifted Jello up to his wife. "Oh my, she's so beautiful" she exclaimed, and held out her arms. "Come here honey, baby come here." She held Jello like a baby, talked to her and rocked her in her

arms for about 10 minutes. They visited the woman for the next two weeks, bringing her comfort in her final days.

When another cancer patient was near the end of her life, Jello sat next to her, being a calm, accepting presence in her final hours. There wasn't much conversation, just quiet reassurance and Jello's quiet form being with the sleeping woman, who raised a hand to pet her once during the visit, acknowledging her presence.

In many such instances, Sister Judy talks to the family members. "Tell me about Maria's cat?" "Do you know how to find her a good home?" Often, a beloved animal must be re-homed when an elderly or ill person cannot care for them. That is one of the concerns of both patients and their families. Sister Judy mentions, "You can call up your veterinarian and your local shelter to let them know there's a cat available. Most of them will appreciate that there's a well-loved cat in need of a home, rather than one being turned in to them because of a behavior problem. They'll look for a suitable home for you." She talks to the family about the many options available to them in the community and listens to their stories about their pet, who is going to move on to a new life, and their family member, who is moving on to a new stage of life.

At Hospice, Sister Judy moves down the hallway and is stopped by a talkative 86 year-old woman with a very swollen knee and obvious stitches. She is in good humor and dressed nattily, wearing makeup. She's out doing her physical therapy, accompanied by a nurse's aide. "You are sooooo cute! You are!" she says to Jello in baby talk, and then turns to Sister Judy. "Where did you get her?" "I got her from the SPCA," Sister Judy explains. "A family left her behind in their apartment when they moved. Finally some neighbors became concerned and notified the SPCA. They thought she was about 3 years old then." The chipper 86 year-old asks, "How old is she now?" "Older than you, in cat years," remarks Sister Judy. "Jello is 18 years old, times 6 or 7 that would be over 100." Sister Judy lifts up Jello and those startling green eyes work their magic on this patient too. "That's the first cat who's looked me in the eye and I've liked" says the woman, who's looked a few cats in the eyes in her day. It's time to move on. There's more love and joy to go around.

Olive in Room 12 is happy to visit with a cat. "What will she do?" asks Olive, who's never had cat therapy before. Sister Judy answers, "She looks pretty, sits on a blanket and goes to sleep." "My niece has a cat who is an orange tabby," Olive muses. She accepts Jello's ministrations with a "Hi sweetheart, honey, come on." "It takes her a minute or two to smell things and settle in," explains Sister Judy as Jello makes herself comfortable. Olive pats Jello and remarks that she has a lot of fluff, but underneath it all she is skinny. "You're right, last year I found out she has renal failure. Every day I give her fluids and have had an extra year with her." Olive looks down at Jello and croons, "You're comfy, aren't you, sweetheart?" Olive keeps petting Jello while she and Sister Judy talk about the flowers and family pictures in the room. This room looks like all the others at Hospice and in many institutional settings. There's a bedside table with water and reading material. There is a plant dropped off by a well-wishing family member. There is medical paraphernalia; a buzzer to call a nurse, a phone to stay in touch with loved ones. And a cat on the bed offering her warm, accepting softness and gentleness.

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