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A Fond Farewell to Rikki An Animal Law Pioneer

Everyone who met Rikki immediately knew how special she was and members of the Animal Law Section were no exception. For those who did not get the chance to meet her, Rikki was a therapy dog that worked for years in the Second Judicial Circuit with her handler, and section member, Chuck Mitchell. She originally came to Chuck and his wife Patty as a foster dog in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. They quickly sensed that she had a special talent for helping people who needed help coping with trauma and other difficult emotional issues. In addition to her work in criminal and dependency cases involving children who were testifying, Rikki also frequently volunteered to

cheer up patients at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital and even helped children who were struggling with reading feel more comfortable.

Rikki was the driving force behind the 2011 law that allowed therapy dogs to be used in court and this is how she came to the attention of what was then the Animal Law Committee of The Florida Bar. She and Chuck were featured on the cover of the November 2014 Special issue of The Florida Bar Journal that was devoted to Animal Law. Rikki also made several appearances at the Annual Bar meeting, often in conjunction with presentations on therapy dogs. In 2016, shortly before the section was launched, Chuck received the Committee's Outstanding Achievement in Animal Law Award for his work and Rikki was there to



Photo: Encounters with Rikki, Julie Strauss Bettinger

help accept the honor.



Rikki's amazing journey was the subject of a book entitled *Encounters with Rikki* (www.amazon.com/Encounters-Rikki-Hurricane-Katrina-Exceptional-ebook/dp/B018136RMU/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496726261&sr=8-1&keywords=encounters+with+Rikki) and she made a number of appearances on a book tour where you could get her Pawtograph on copies of the book. Although Rikki officially retired in November of last year, she was definitely present in the minds of those who helped with the Justice's Best Friend Act, which passed during the 2017 legislative session (see article in this newsletter). The legislation was to conform the law to what was happening in various parts of the day with the ultimate goal of expanding the use of therapy dogs like Rikki in courts throughout the entire state. Sadly, just one day after Governor Scott signed the new legislation, our friend Rikki passed away just short of her 12th birthday.

The Section is currently planning a new award, which will go exclusively to animals, that will be named after Rikki. Section members who are interested in honoring Rikki's memory can contribute a memorial gift in her honor to the Tallahassee Memorial Animal Therapy Program. (<https://www.tmh.org/giving/remembering-rikki>)