



Because of COVID-19, we've all suffered loneliness and loss of companionship this past year. But it's time to start finding inspiration again in other people and in new animal friends.

Mouse's Last Visit

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I've been doing virtual author visits since long before anyone ever heard of COVID-19. I love doing them because they give me an opportunity to connect with students I may never meet otherwise. I keep the sessions pretty informal. I do some Q&A, I show the kids around my office, and until March 2021, I always introduced them to my 103-pound dog, Mouse. Fans of my *Buddy Files* and *King & Kayla* series were often delighted to discover that Mouse was real.

On March 11, 2021, I had a virtual visit scheduled with "Mrs. Latek's fantastic first-graders" in Northbrook, Illinois. Unfortunately, two days before the visit, I realized I would have to reschedule. My beloved Mouse was not well, and I needed to take the only appointment our vet had available. Mrs. Latek and I agreed we would move the visit up a

day, which felt bittersweet. You see, Mouse wasn't just unwell; it was time to send him over the Rainbow Bridge. I wasn't ready. I would never be ready. But I really did want to do one last virtual visit with him.

For twelve years, Mouse had been my constant writing companion. Every morning I'd say, "Let's go to work," and he'd follow me to my office, where he'd curl up on his pillow while I wrote about a dog detective, a haunted library, or a dog and cat who write letters to one another. Mouse listened to me read my manuscripts out loud, trying to get the words just right. And he LOVED virtual visits. They were his favorite thing!

Whenever I said, "We're going to meet some kids today," he'd sit up and stare into my computer screen, waiting for them to appear. When they finally did, his tail spun like a

propeller, and he'd often offer our virtual audience a toy. Then he would sit proudly by my side while I talked about my books. I think some of those kids were more excited to meet him than they were to meet me. They would compare the real-life Mouse to Buddy, King, or the fictional Mouse. Sometimes Mouse would show off a couple of his tricks, and at the end of the session, he'd wave good-bye.

But on March 10, 2021, all he could do was lay on the floor while I talked to Mrs. Latek's first-graders

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by myself, his whole life playing in my head like a movie on fast forward. I told the kids we adopted Mouse because I wanted to start a "Read to a Therapy Dog" program at my local library. I got the idea to write my *Buddy Files* series while I was training him. A therapy dog comes in contact with lots of different people who have a variety of problems. Maybe even mysteries to be solved.

I told them I originally wanted to call that series the *Mouse Files*, but I was afraid readers would think it was about a mouse rather than a dog. So, I changed the main character's name to Buddy and gave him a very large best friend named Mouse.

They wanted to know why we named our dog Mouse. I told them that was my teenagers' idea. My teenagers thought it would be hilarious to have such a large dog named Mouse. I agreed because I knew it would be a great conversation starter when he was a therapy dog.

Mouse was a wonderful therapy dog, who inspired many children to become better readers. He appeared on the local news (twice) and in several author videos produced by Open Road Media.

He was also indirectly responsible for my *Dear Beast* series. After my daughter grew up and moved out, she adopted a cat named Simon. The first time she visited as a cat owner, it was clear that Mouse could smell Simon's scent on her. I started to imagine what Mouse might say to Simon and what Simon would say back. Thus, a new series was born.

When I waved good-bye to Mrs. Latek's first-graders on March 10, I wondered how I would ever talk about my *Buddy Files*, *King & Kayla*, or *Dear Beast* series after Mouse was gone. He was the inspiration behind at least twenty-one books.



It's been such a difficult year. For all of us, not just me. Because of COVID-19, we've all suffered loneliness and loss of companionship this past year. But it's time to start finding inspiration again in other people and in new animal friends.

My husband and I have taken steps in that direction by opening our home to a foster dog. Believe it or not, the dog's name is Buddy! He was found in a field, nearly dead, and taken to an animal shelter where he spent nearly a year getting healthy. He'll remain with us until he finds his forever family. He is not Mouse. He is not Buddy from my books. He is his own dog.

It also feels good to talk about Mouse. And to share my office with a different dog. I am settling in to the new normal, just like the rest of the world.

In May, I had a virtual visit with Xiamen International School in China. This was my fifth visit with this school, but my first without Mouse. It was also my first virtual visit with Buddy in the room. I didn't intend to introduce him, but he climbed into my lap and introduced himself. It felt surprisingly okay. I've learned that I can talk about my

three series, even though Mouse is no longer here. In fact, it feels good to talk about my books. It also feels good to talk about Mouse. And to share my office with a different dog. I am settling in to the new normal, just like the rest of the world.

When I adopted Mouse, I had no idea the effect he would have on my life or my career. I just wanted to help kids become stronger readers. I'm so grateful to Xiamen International School, Mrs. Latek's Fantastic First-Graders, and to all the other students, teachers, and librarians that Mouse and I have had the pleasure of connecting with through the years. You've not only enriched my life, you've also given my dog's life meaning and purpose. And because of you, his memory lives on.

Dori Hillestad Butler is the author of more than 55 books for young readers including the two-time Geisel Honor award-winning King & Kayla series, the Edgar award-winning Buddy Files series, the Treasure Troop series, the Dear Beast series, and the Haunted Library series. Her books have been named to ALSC Notable, CCBC Choice, Bank Street College Best Book of the Year, Junior Library Guild, Chicago Public Library Best Fiction for Younger Readers, and many state award lists. Dori grew up in southern Minnesota, spent 19 years in Iowa, and now lives in the Seattle area. She loves visiting schools and libraries all over the country.

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