

They guided me through what was, up to that point, the worst time in my life. They inspired me to keep going and to not think I was weak for feeling that losing Higgins was the most horrible thing in the world.

I've written many things over the years, a lot of which I think are much better than this column. But this—along with another piece I wrote six years later about getting sober—is the most honest. I think people reacted to my honesty with honesty of their own. And that seems even more important these days than it was almost a decade ago, when Higgins died.

Given what 2020 has turned into, I think, right now, the world could use a lot more honesty. And, of course, a lot more dogs like Higgins.

And another. And another. And they didn't stop for weeks and weeks.

People I didn't know sent me sympathy cards in the mail. People I didn't know sent me photos of their pets. A veterinarian asked me if I would mind if she hung the article up in her office for people to read. It got to the point that almost every day, I would say out loud at the office, "I got another Higgins letter," and laugh. And then I would read the letter. And cry.

It was a rollercoaster of emotions for a handful of months, stuck between wanting to stay busy as much as possible and not wanting to get out of bed. I'd be lying if I said alcohol wasn't a constant. But the letters people sent me are what really got me through it.

I thanked a number of people at the end of the column, but I have to add to that list all of the people who wrote me nine years ago.



Higgins

by ERIC T. MILLER

about myself and my life each issue, but this Editor Note was different. I was writing it for me, as my way to grieve. As a way of making Higgins' death real—as if these words appearing in print, in a magazine, would mean there was no chance of him ever coming back.

It didn't take much longer to write than it does to read. I just sat down and typed, pausing repeatedly to wipe away all the tears that made it impossible for me to see my laptop's screen. A couple weeks later, it was out in the world for people to read, and though I kind of wondered how people would react to it or if anyone would even read it, I didn't really care. Like I said, I wrote it for myself, not thinking about our readers.

But then I got an email from a subscriber saying that she had just lost her dog and that reading what I'd written helped her immensely. Then I got another, similar email.

Higgins died December 17. He was 10. He was the best thing that ever happened to my wife and me. He died in bed between us.

He made people smile. He took over a room. He was all good, but sometimes he could get a little of the devil in him. But people never minded. When you are that handsome and charming, you can get away with stuff the rest of us can't.

I would put him on my chest while laying on the couch and say, "Let me examine this evidence." It was a silly thing to do, but we did it just about every day. We did it the day he died. I don't recall when I started doing that, but I don't remember not doing it. It was one of our things. He and I had a lot of things that made no sense to anyone else, but we did them anyway. Because they made us both happy.

He was attached to me. He watched everything I did. Always. But I was more attached to him. No matter how bad things got in my life,

I need to thank his vets in both Philadelphia and Barnegat, N.J., and, especially, all of his doctors and nurses and everyone else at the Matthew J. Ryan Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania. I need to thank our parents to and driving him to the hospital when we couldn't, and comforting us and treating Higgins like part of the family.

But mostly I need to thank Higgins for everything he gave me over the past decade. Finishing this issue without him around the office is the hardest thing I have ever had to do.

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It's hard to believe I wrote that nine years ago. It's even harder to believe Higgins hasn't been in my life for almost as long as he was in my life. I wrote it as my Editor Note for the magazine I ran, right after Higgins died. I hated writing

I always had him to make me feel good. Now I don't.

He was with me almost 24 hours a day for more than nine years. If I would walk down the street without him, people would always ask me, "Where's Higgins?" They still do. And now it really hurts.

He was sick for six years. We spent more money making him well than I did on five years of college. He had the biggest medical chart at his doctor's office. It was the size of a phone book. I commented on how large it was once, and they told me, "That's only half his chart."

He loved resting in the sun. He was violently afraid of lightning and thunder. He took advantage of me constantly, and I let him. Everybody loved him, and he loved everybody. He thought he was the center of attention, and he usually was. He would jump on people's laps and lick their faces. And people would let him get away with it. Even strangers.

Because he was Higgins. And he was special. He had a scar on his head from where he got bit by a lab. He had scars above each of his paws from all the IV's he had to get over the years. Some of his hair never grew back from the many times he had to get shaved at the doctor. He went prematurely gray. His eyes were a mess, the result of an emergency surgery on each. Yet he remained the most handsome dog I have ever seen.

He had irritable bowel disease. He had Addison's disease. He once lost half his blood via his GI tract. He also once dropped from 22 pounds to 12 in a matter of weeks. He had to eat prescription food. He had to take six pills a day. And have two or three different eye drops every four hours. But they told us he wasn't ever suffering. And that his quality of life was good. And that he was lucky to have owners like us who cared about him so much. But they were only partially right. *We were the lucky ones to have him.*