

Oinking for help

Pot-bellied pig saves owner's life by lying in front of a car

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By Michael A. Fuoco, (Pittsburg) Post-Gazette Staff Writer

It was just like those "Lassie" episodes where Timmy would injure himself in the wilderness and the ever-loyal, super-intelligent collie would run to town, bark for help and lead rescuers to her master.

OK, it was almost like that.

Except that Jo Ann Altsman of Beaver Falls didn't twist her ankle but had a heart attack.

And it wasn't in the wilderness but in the bedroom of her vacation trailer on Presque Isle.

And the pet that ran -- er, waddled -- for help was a Vietnamese pot-bellied pig named LuLu.

When you think about it, LuLu's real-life feat the morning of Aug. 4 was much more amazing than any of Lassie's fictional rescues because she can't bark. That didn't matter. Smart pig that she is, LuLu did the next best thing.

She laid down in front of a car on the road outside the trailer and then led a disbelieving motorist to Altsman, whose ordeal lasted 45 minutes.

Had 15 more minutes elapsed, doctors told her, she likely would have died.

"Pigs are very, very smart," Altsman, 57, said yesterday. She is recuperating from heart surgery she underwent Sept. 15. "They're a lot smarter than dogs."

Take that, Lassie!

And you, too, Bear. That's Altsman's American Eskimo dog who did nothing but bark at her after she collapsed and tried to summon help by breaking a bedroom window. Altsman's husband, Jack, was fishing on Lake Erie at the time.

"I was yelling 'Somebody help me. Please help me. Call an ambulance,'" recalled Altsman, who had had another heart attack 18 months earlier.

Enter LuLu.

"She looked at my head. She made sounds like she was crying," said Altsman, who then imitated the sound -- quite indescribable -- of a crying Vietnamese pot-bellied pig.

"You know, they cry big fat tears," she noted.



Jo Ann Altsman attributes her Vietnamese Pot Belly Pig, Lu Lu with saving her life last month. (Annie O'Neill, Post-Gazette)

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But the porker pulled herself together, and headed outside through the doggy/piggy door and into the fenced-in yard. Never before had LuLu left the confines of the yard -- except for a leash walk -- but this was no ordinary day. She somehow pushed open the gate and walked into the road.

There, LuLu gave new meaning to the phrase "hogging the road." Witnesses later told Altsman that LuLu waited until a car approached and then walked onto the road and laid down in front of it. Several times she returned to Altsman only to leave again and try to get help.

One man stopped but later said he was so unsure of what the creature on the road was that he was afraid to get out.

"She's not very attractive," Altsman allowed.

But another motorist stopped for the prone pig and got out. LuLu knew just what to do. She led the man to the house and the rescue.

"I heard a man hollering through the door, 'Lady, your pig's in distress,'" Altsman said. "I said, 'I'm in distress, too. Please call an ambulance.'"

The man, whose name Altsman never learned, did just that and medics quickly arrived. But when the pig tried to get into the ambulance with Altsman, medics gently let LuLu know she had done enough for one day.

Later, it was discovered that LuLu had cut her rather pronounced stomach on the obviously too-small doggy/piggy door.

"My husband keeps enlarging it but she keeps enlarging, too," Altsman said of LuLu, who turned 1 on July 4.

LuLu was purchased in Edinboro in August 1997 by Jack Altsman as a 40th-birthday present for the couple's daughter, Jackie, of Fombell, Beaver County. Jackie, however, went on a five-day whale-watching trip to New England and asked her parents to baby-sit LuLu.

Jackie really didn't want the pig, Altsman said. "She came back on Aug. 18 and kept putting off (picking up LuLu), saying, 'Next weekend, next weekend.' You know how kids are."

The Altsmans became attached to the porcine house pet, even as it exploded from 4 pounds to 150. And counting.

And how did Altsman thank LuLu?

"She got a jelly doughnut," said Altsman. She then made a sloshing type noise that LuLu apparently makes when she devours pastry.

Somehow, Lassie no longer came to mind.