



A guide to finer living in  
Connecticut & abroad  
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“All creatures drink of joy All nature’s beasts”

*Friedrich Schiller, Ode to Joy*



# Ode to Joy

## A Homage to Disability and Life Lessons

*Profile by Rona Mann*

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ow do you define joy? How can you bottle it? How can you spread it around?

The answers to the above three questions lie in the tiny heart of a six-and-a-half-pound blind, deaf, pink dog who in his own way is changing the world with his resolute mindset. This is Piglet.

A bit of backstory first. Piglet, a Dachshund/Chihuahua mix, came to Veterinarian, Melissa Shapiro and her husband Warren four years ago as almost a lost cause. He was born into a horrendous hoarding situation in Georgia, the progeny of two double-dapple-colored parents. There is always a 25% chance that puppies born as a result of a double-dapple breeding can also be double-dapple leading to partial or complete deafness and blindness. In that regard, Piglet drew the short straw and is totally deaf in both ears and totally blind in both eyes, rendering him according to Shapiro, "Profoundly disabled." But that did not deter her from agreeing to foster him for the rescue group who could not give him the individualized attention he desperately needed.

*“Piglet not only showed the class what it’s like to be both deaf and blind, but he also taught the lesson that it’s important to move past what you don’t have and develop what you do have and never give up.”*



Piglet traveled to Melissa’s Westport home four and a half years ago. He was only eight weeks old and weighed just one and a half pounds at the time. In addition to not being able to hear or see, he suffered severe separation anxiety, so not knowing where he was or with whom, he screamed in desperation, day and night. “He screamed for months,” Shapiro said. She and her husband, Warren who had six other rescues who were

already permanent members in their family agreed to foster Piglet until he could find a forever home...if one could even be found. Two months later, he found that home, right where he was with the Shapiros and “his pack.” Finally, the screaming stopped and the cuddling began. So did playing with his siblings, learning to enjoy walks, trips to the

animal hospital with Melissa, visits at the bank, the pet store...everywhere Piglet went he was making fast friends.

This story is front and center about Piglet, but it is also front and center about Melissa Shapiro. Being a veterinarian for more than 35 years gives her a strong scientific background in understanding, handling, and healing animals. But being Melissa Shapiro gives her an added advantage...one of patience, of caring, and of a heart that knows no bounds in stretching to not only love, but to take the time to work with every one of her dogs to make them the very best they can be. With Piglet, that takes ongoing work, but he is very bright and a willing participant in the process, so it’s a win-win every day. Actually, it’s a win-win-win because Piglet’s mindset and attitude have now extended from Westport well out into the wide world.

Just one year after coming to live with the Shapiros, he visited a third grade classroom in Plainville, Massachusetts. Teacher, Trish

Above Right: Baby Piglet in blanket by Melissa Shapiro  
Above Left: Baby Piglet by Melissa Shapiro  
Lower Left: Piglet bench by Melissa Shapiro

*“He’s mapped out his entire home environment and knows exactly where he’s going. He also uses his nose to compensate for his eyes and ears,”*



Fregeau said, “At Jackson School, we really push the growth mindset, and Piglet is a living example of someone overcoming challenges, constantly learning, and thriving. Piglet not only showed the class what it’s like to be both deaf and blind, but he also taught the lesson that it’s important to move past what you don’t have and develop what you do have and never give up.” Parents are still contacting Melissa to report that when their kids have a problem, they first deal with it by saying, “What would Piglet do?”

Since that day, Piglet has made other classroom appearances teaching children about inclusion, about overcoming challenges, and about never giving up. There is a Piglet page on Facebook with thousands of followers worldwide, and Melissa can barely keep up with the messages she receives daily from all over the world.

Just wait till they read the book! Yes, there is a book, just published by Simon & Schuster/ Atria Books, *Piglet, The Unexpected Story of a Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy and His Family*, and of course there will be an influx of media, book signings, and a tour. But Piglet’s ready...he was born ready. He just needed people like Melissa and Warren with love and patience

to bring out that special innate “pigginess” that lay deep within his wonderful little soul.

So, how does Piglet function? Very well! “He’s mapped out his entire home environment and knows exactly where he’s going. He also uses his nose to compensate for his eyes and ears,” says Melissa. When he meets people, he likes to climb in their laps, sniff their noses, and smell their breath. “That’s how he remembers people. You can come back in a week or two, and he’ll know he knows you by your smell,” she adds. “He uses what he has, not what he’s missing.”

Melissa teaches him with what she calls “tap signals,” and Piglet has proven to be a quick and eager learner who builds on experiences. She taps his hindquarters, and he knows to sit. Other taps on other parts of his body ask him if he needs to relieve himself, wants to eat, etc.

The members of Piglet’s “pack - Annie, Zoey, Evie, Dean, and Gina - embraced him quickly, the Shapiro’s passel of other rescues ready to welcome him into the fold. Once the screaming stopped and he began to relax and become one with his environment, Piglet started exploring the joy of having siblings

*“The things that make me different are the things that make me.”*

who were willing to let him into their world and their play. “He bumps into them all the time and bumps into furniture, but he always figures a way around eventually,” Shapiro added.

Not surprisingly, Melissa and Warren have started a non-profit to support educational programs as well as dog rescues and other organizations that support their mission. Donations directly fund the Piglet Mindset Educational Outreach Program going toward offsetting the costs of materials, school visits, travel expenses, and support for teachers

using the Piglet Mindset curriculum. Thus far, in addition to outright donations, they have sold over 9000 tee-shirts to support these causes.

It is important to remember that in both humans as well as animals the heart is a muscle, and muscles can stretch. In the case of Melissa and Piglet, those hearts are stretching all around the world each day teaching the lessons of optimism, flexibility, resilience, perseverance, and empathy. Those five elements make up the Piglet Mindset.

In the A.A. Milne classic series, *Winnie the Pooh*, Piglet is a much-beloved character and Pooh’s best friend, yet he possesses a significant inferiority complex. One day, however, he feels a bit emboldened and says to Pooh, “The things that make me different are the things that make me.”

As Melissa said previously and reiterates in every interview and with every appearance, “we all have challenges.” Piglet’s message to the world is how to manage and overcome them..and he does, every day of his life.

It’s his ode to joy.

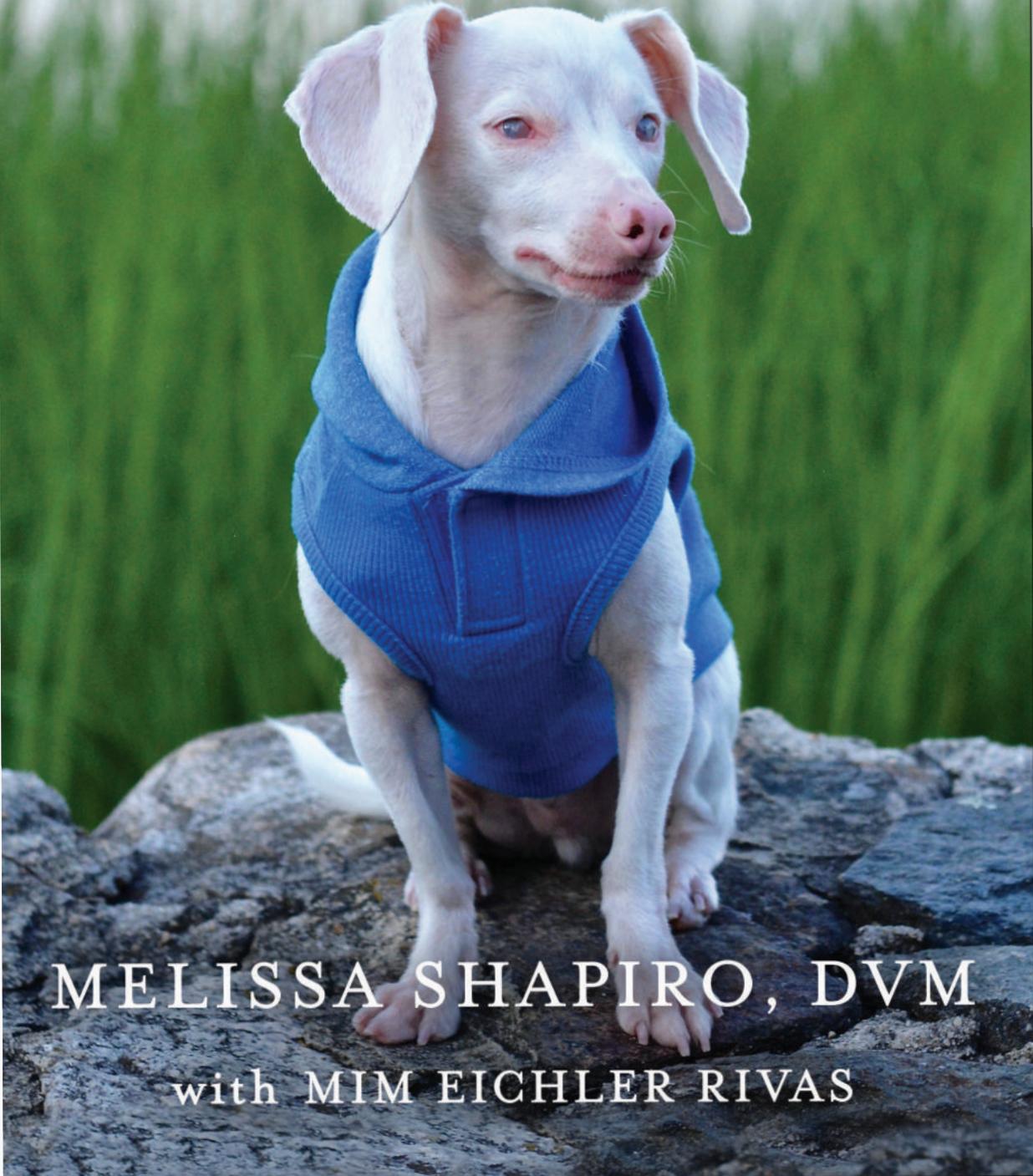
*Simon and Schuster/Atria Books has just published the book PIGLET: The Unexpected Story of a Deaf, Blind, Pink Puppy and his Family written by Melissa Shapiro and Mim Eichler Rivas...with more than a little help from Piglet! For more information on the work Piglet is doing or to donate to his non-profit to help other special needs animals, visit: [www.pigletmindset.org](http://www.pigletmindset.org)*



Above Right: *Piglet & Susie* by Melissa Shapiro  
 Bottom: *Piglet’s Pack* by Joan Carruthers Photography  
 Opposite Page: *Piglet Cover* by Simon & Schuster, Photo by Joan Carruthers Photography

# PIGLET

The Unexpected Story of a Deaf, Blind,  
Pink Puppy and His Family



MELISSA SHAPIRO, DVM

with MIM EICHLER RIVAS