Episode Title: Cyrus, Lucky and Deuce: The World's Greatest Two-Legged Therapy Dogs

Episode Summary:
On this episode of Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies, host Karman Hotchkiss sits down with Domenick Scudera, professor of theater at Ursinus College in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, and proud dog dad of Cyrus, Lucky and Deuce, a trio of therapy dogs who share one special trait in common: they each only have two legs. But don’t think their disability stands in their way. Cyrus, Lucky and Deuce may have had a rough start in the world, but thanks to Domenick’s and their dogged determination, these guys are living their best lives ever.

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Episode Transcript:

Music: Daily Paws Theme Music begins

Karman Hotchkiss (VO):
Welcome to Warm Fuzzies, a new podcast from Daily Paws. I’m your host, Karman Hotchkiss. We’ll be sharing heartwarming stories that highlight the lives of some very special furry friends. You’ll hear tales of unlikely partnerships, miracle rescues, hero pets and more. Today I’m chatting with theater professor Domenick Scudera. Domenick teaches at Ursinus College, in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, just outside Philadelphia. But when he’s not leading classes or directing plays, you can almost always find Domenick with his trio of 2-legged therapy dogs. Yup, each one has only two legs, but no need to feel sorry for them. These are exceptional dogs, as you will find out, and besides being adorable, they exude such positive energy that their Instagram page— @2legdogs— has amassed more than 100,000 followers from around the world. More locally, Domenick brings them to area hospitals where they offer people with serious conditions much needed inspiration and unconditional love. How they found their way to their adoring dog dad Domenick is an incredible tale. Just listen.
Karman Hotchkiss:
Welcome to Warm Fuzzies! Domenick Scudera, it's so lovely to have you with us today.

Domenick Scudera:
Thank you for having me on. I'm very happy to be talking with you.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Well, let's start with an introduction of yourself, and then tell us about your two-legged partners?

Domenick Scudera:
Yes, thank you. Um, so I teach at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania. I am a theater professor, but a lot of my free time is devoted to pet therapy, and three of my dogs are therapy dogs, and they are each very unique. One has front legs, one has back legs, and one has right legs, and I take them to visit people in hospitals, so that hopefully they can inspire those that are going through troubling times themselves.

Karman Hotchkiss:
What a great collection of therapy partners you have. Tell us about each of them, what's their story? How did they come to you, and, what do we know about their lives before they got to you?

Domenick Scudera:
They all have interesting stories. So, I'll start with the oldest, who is Cyrus. He is the smallest of the group. He is about 12 years old now. He's originally from California. He was born with only back legs, no front legs, and, I don't know much about his first year, but when he was a about a year old, whoever had him brought him to an animal shelter, and just literally left him on the counter and walked out. So we don't know what happened there, but at least whoever it was thought, "Maybe this dog could have a life beyond what I could give him," um, and at the time that he was brought to that shelter, I was looking for another dog that might be able to take on the therapy dog routine that I had established with another dog of mine, a three-legged dog, named Festus, and I had trained him to be a therapy dog, and I found that he was helping people in so many ways when I brought him to visit, an amputee clinic that we go to once a week. So, as Festus was getting older, I was looking for another dog, and, uh, Cyrus I saw on a website for dogs with disabilities, and I sent a notice saying, "I'm interested," and they said, "If you can come and get him, you can have him," (laughs). So, I flew to California, I brought him back home, and he turned out to be the perfect therapy dog, because he's so sweet, and good-natured, and he is small and you can hug him and he's been a favorite. He was very much a favorite at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, the kids really loved him. Now since then, I've become known as someone that adopts animals that are, (laughs), differently abled,
especially less-limbed animals. People started to reach out to me, um, whenever a two-legged dog might be needing someone to adopt them, and there was another dog... this is Lucky, my second dog, um, who is originally from Egypt, and he was found, uh, on the streets outside of Cairo. Lucky must’ve been hit by a car, we think. He was also about a year old. When he was found... the woman that found him, her name was Marwa. She fought for him to just get medical care, and then she sent him to the United States for a better life, and when he was coming to the United States, um, I, that's when I caught up with his story. I thought he was amazing, you know, this dog running around on front legs only, uh, and I inquired about him, and within two weeks he was on my doorstep, (laughs). So, Lucky has since gotten wheels. He does use wheels to walk. He doesn't need them necessarily. He can run around and balance on his front legs. Lucky is very able, you know, he's able to run around. He's very vocal. He's really goofy and funny, and he is just full of life. Just a fun, fun dog.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Are Cyrus and Lucky, do they connect in therapy situations with different kinds of people?

**Domenick Scudera:**
Well, it's interesting, so when they are in a hospital, I'm not privy to what the injury or the reason why someone might be in the hospital, but I can sense from the dog that they understand, um, a certain level of need, so, I've gone into rooms where it instantly was apparent to me that this was someone that might be at the very end of their life, just from the way the dog acted. Um, the dog seemed to sense where they should be in relation to the person physically, because sometimes people aren't able to reach to their right, or to their left, or, you know, we meet a lot of stroke patients maybe that are accessing different parts of them physically, and the dog seems to understand that before I have to be taught that... yeah, it's pretty amazing, (laughs).

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
That's really amazing.

**Domenick Scudera:**
So, yes, I think that the dogs have a certain sense, uh, about people that- that I do not and I just take my cues off of them very often.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Well, so, we need dog number three here?

**Domenick Scudera:**
Yes. So, dog number three is Deuce, and Deuce is originally from Kentucky, and he was found in a ditch and had broken and infected left legs, and those legs needed to be amputated, and, um,
at the time the- the rescue, they didn't know how he would fair as a dog with legs only on one side, that's very unusual. So, it's not as unusual to have a dog with only back legs, or only front legs. Dogs with legs only on one side, there's not that many of them really in the world, and so, you know, "How would he fair?" And, it ended up, eh, he's the most amazing dog. I mean, he can run around just as fast as any other dog. When I take him for walks, people have absolutely no idea if they look quickly that he's any different, because he's very solid, he's pulling me along, he's got a very even gait. You know, he's not lopsided or anything. It's unbelievable how, um, solid and able that dog is. He doesn't need wheels. I mentioned that Lucky got wheels. Cyrus, we got him a set of wheels. Deuce does not need them. Um, he is fully capable. I mean, he can run up-and-down the stairs. It's- it's pretty remarkable.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Probably does better than I do with my two legs, (laughs).

**Domenick Scudera:**
(laughs), Yeah. Yeah, I mean, people are always amazed that... often they think, "Oh, your dog is missing a leg," and I'll say, "No, no, he's missing two legs," and they're looking at the dog, and they can't believe it.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
That's pretty amazing.

**Domenick Scudera:**
Yeah.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
If you were gonna guess what breed each of these dogs is, just to help us kinda picture it, how would you describe each of them?

**Domenick Scudera:**
Cyrus is a little terrier, I don't know what kind of terrier, but he's scruffy and he has a very terrier looking face. You know, he's maybe 15 pounds. Uh, Lucky is what they call in Egypt, "A Baladi dog," or Baladi, I don't know how to pronounce it. It's Arabic, and they look like he does, he's white with brown patches, very big ears that are straight-up. Um, you know, dogs that you would see in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, he has that kind of face, the long face and the big ears that stand straight-up. Um, and then he's kind of lanky, uh, long legs, but about 30 pounds. Deuce is also about 30 pounds. When I adopted him, um, they told me he was a Kentucky Brown dog, which is not a breed, it means he's from Kentucky and he's brown-

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
(laughs).
Domenick Scudera:  
... and he's a dog, (laughs).

Karman Hotchkiss:  
(laughs).

Domenick Scudera:  
Um, so, you know, he's more of a mutt in the traditional American sense.

Karman Hotchkiss:  
He's a dog's dog.

Domenick Scudera:  
Yes.

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Karman Hotchkiss (VO): We’re taking a quick break, but when we come back, we’ll find out from Domenick what it takes to train a therapy dog—and how adopting a differently abled dog is not that different from caring for one that’s not. Be right back!

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Karman Hotchkiss (VO): Welcome back to Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies. I’m Karman Hotchkiss, and today I’m talking with professor Domenick Scudera about his terrific trio of two-legged therapy dogs, Cyrus, Lucky and Deuce.

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Karman Hotchkiss:
What is involved in helping them learn to be therapy dogs, I think, it sounds like they each naturally have - a way of connecting with people that's really special, and then you take it from there in terms of training. What's that look like?

**Domenick Scudera:**
So, I think that a dog who, uh, you would like to be a therapy dog has to have a certain disposition to begin with, so they have to be sweet-natured and ready to, um, take command. They will listen to you.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Accept cues, and-

**Domenick Scudera:**
Yes, exactly that, you know. So basic training is the start. You've gotta teach the dog, sit, stay, all of that sort of thing. If you go online, you can find registries that are helping to get dogs into this kind of work, and they will offer classes that you can bring your dog to that will start to get the dog acclimated to what they might be, uh, experiencing if they were in a hospital. So, the training then is taking their skills that they've learned already, sit, stay and that kinda thing, but then saying like, "What will that be like around wheelchairs, or around a lot of noise, or machinery."

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Weird smells.

**Domenick Scudera:**
Yeah, exactly, hustle and bustle, um, "Are they still controllable in that situation?" Um, if there's food, you know, say when I go visit patients, they might be having lunch, the dog can't just jump up and eat the person's food, right? So, you have to give the dog some kind of experience of, "What is it gonna be like in the hospital?" and "Will you be listening to your handler in that situation?" Um, after you go through that training, there's a test, and so, you have to be really, um, you know, dedicated, work hard with the dog.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Do you take the dogs together when you go to do therapy work, one at a time?

**Domenick Scudera:**
So I take the dogs one at a time when we go for a therapy visit. When they are certified to be therapy dogs, we are actually certified as a team, so it's me and the dog. The dog cannot go to a hospital unless I'm with the dog, and, if I am with two dogs, it's really two teams simultaneously, and I haven't really been certified to do that.
Karman Hotchkiss:
That makes a lot of sense. Um, can you tell us about one maybe particular story where one of the dogs connected with somebody in a therapy situation in a way that seemed particularly unusual or profound?

Domenick Scudera:
One that comes directly to mind is a few years ago... I actually don't remember which dog it was, I think it might've been Lucky, he was visiting someone who had recently lost both of his legs in a terrible accident. I actually think it was a train accident, and as I imagine any of us might react, it was a very, very difficult time for... it was a young man, you know, maybe in his 20s. And, you know, he was having a very tough time... and when I brought the dog in, he just instantly realized that the dog had gone through something similar and he just brought the dog to his chest, and held him at length for quite some time, and a lot of the medical staff just stopped what they were doing, and everybody came around because they were so thrilled that this young man was finding some kind of comfort, or peace, or connection that, I think, they were having trouble getting through to him, and somehow the dog was able to do it without words, and everyone knew it.

Karman Hotchkiss:
That's a beautiful story, and phew, I assume that once you have served someone in a therapy situation, you may or may not ever see them again, uh, is that hard?

Domenick Scudera:
Not really, I'm aware that the situation that we're in is temporary, that I'm only kind of connecting with this person in a moment in their life when it might be the lowest point in their life, and knowing that I'm able to bring something to them that might make them feel just a little bit better in that moment, to me is enough. So, that's sort of part of the deal, when you are volunteering in any capacity at a hospital, that you're there to help them through this moment, and- knowing that I'm helping someone in a brief way, is- is reward enough.

Karman Hotchkiss:
That's really cool. What else would you like people to know about having a therapy dog, being a partner with the dog, and doing that kind of work?

Domenick Scudera:
I often say that it's a win-win-win situation. So, the dog loves going on visits, right, so the dog is having a great time being the center of attention. The patient is gaining something from it because they are, um, in that moment feeling hopefully just a little lift, a little light, um, and then the last win is for me, you know, and what I really like is that I'm just the guy with the dog, no one knows who I am. They don't know my name, they don't know what I do. They don't
I know all the things that go on in my life. I'm just the guy with the dog, and in those situations, it makes me feel terrific that I was able to help somebody. So, um, it's a win-win-win.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
That's really cool. In your own home where you're not just the guy with the dog but you're-

**Domenick Scudera:**
(laughs).

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
... you're dad, you're everything. What have you needed to do to have animals that are differently abled, that have some special needs. I assume you've maybe made some adjustments to your household in different ways, uh, what- what does that look like?

**Domenick Scudera:**
I honestly believe that having a dog with disabilities is not very different from having any pet, (laughs). Dogs that are disabled are much harder to place certainly. Um, when they are up for adoption, people will pass over them. I try to tell people that, often that is probably the more rewarding experience if you adopt the disabled dog, because.. first of all, they will, appreciate on some level, (laughs), um, what you've done for them, but also having that dog will connect you to so many different people. So, you know, even if I wasn't doing therapy dog work, the fact that I just walk the dogs around on the street, and people will stop me and talk to me, and, you know, that wouldn't happen if I didn't have the dog. I feel like, um, I feel that- that my life is enriched by having these dogs, and I- I encourage people to not look past a dog with disabilities. Yes, in our household, we've made some adjustments, but you do for any dog, really, right? For instance, like Lucky, Lucky can't go up and down stairs, so, I just got a little ramp so that when he wants to go out, he can go down the ramp, a little wheelchair ramp, um, that's all. We got him a set of wheels, that he mostly uses when he's out, not in the house, because he can walk without them, but, um, for longer walks, we got him wheels. You can go online and order some wheels, it's, you know, it's not that hard, (laughs). Putting him in the wheels doesn't take that much effort, so, you know, it- it's not that different, um, now it depends on the dog. So, you know, I would say Cyrus is easier than most dogs because I literally just lift him up and put him outside and he poops and he pees and then I pick him up and I bring him back inside, he's never in the wrong place, he's, you know, because he can't really get around that easily, um, he's the less mobile of the three. So, he's actually, you know, just a simple, easy dog to take care of. Lucky is the hardest to take care of, because his injuries were more severe. Lucky, uh, has no feeling on his back end, so that does mean that I have to help him go to the bathroom, and, I know, people wonder about this. That was the thing I really didn't wanna do was, like, have to help a dog to pee or express a bladder, um, and yet here's this dog on my doorstep, I had to figure out how to express his bladder. I figured it out, it was really easy. I do it like, I don't know, 10 times a day for the last 10 years. It, yeah, I don't even think about it anymore. It's just part of my routine, it's not that big a deal.
Karman Hotchkiss:
As pet owners, we deal with a lot of bodily functions, and this is-

Domenick Scudera:
... yes.

Karman Hotchkiss:
... it sounds like just a step a little farther, but not that much different.

Domenick Scudera:
Exactly, it's just not that much farther. You know, many of my friends might have pets that have other issues, you know, they bark too much, or they scratch, and they do this, and they do that, and you make adjustments because that particular dog that you have has this need that you need to address. It's the same with my dogs.

Karman Hotchkiss:
What else would you like people to know about having dogs with different abilities?

Domenick Scudera:
Because they are harder to place, don't overlook them. You know, there's so many animals that need homes, and, um, there's stray dogs everywhere, and people wanna find the perfect pet, but when they go to do that, they think that the pet has to be a certain look, or has to have a certain ability, and I just think that is negating so much that could be brought into your life when you reject an animal who is different.

Karman Hotchkiss:
You make it look doable.

Domenick Scudera:
It is doable, it's totally doable. Um, you know, I'm not that different than anybody else who has a dog ultimately. I'm hopeful that my story with my dogs might on some level make some people, uh, more open to the idea of adopting a pet that is disabled, or different in some way.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Obviously your dogs, um, they have a lot of heart, and they connect with people really well and that's what makes them good at their jobs, makes them good therapy partners with you, and, um, and- and probably people connect with that, as you said, like just when you're on the street, uh, that they're good ambassadors for just being great dogs.
Domenick Scudera:
I hope so, you know, I- I- I love to take them for walks, uh, as I said, I'm a college professor, and I live right by the campus, so we walk the dogs, uh, on campus every day, and the students flock over and, you know, they, eh, it's- it's very nice to be able to connect with people, um, when you're out and about, and even, as I said, the- the social media presence that my dogs have had have... I've been told from people that have written to me, um, you know, someone from the other side of the world could see my dogs, and say, "Wow, you know, that really inspired me today," and it's so, you know, it's so nice to know that, um, that my dogs are able to do that for people.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Well, thank you for making it possible for them to do that with people.

Domenick Scudera:
Oh, I- I mean, I wouldn't have it any other way. If anybody has ever thought like, "My dog really seems to respond to people," and, "My dog would make a good therapy dog," my suggestion is, you know, look to your local hospitals and find out if they have a- a therapy dog program. It's not that hard.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Awesome. Thank you for being with us today Domenick, you and your pets are wonderful examples of joy and resiliency, and couldn't we all use more of that every day?

Domenick Scudera:
Thank you, thanks for letting me talk on and on about my dogs, something I love to do, (laughs). I appreciate the invitation to share their story with you.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Thank you.

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Karman Hotchkiss (VO):
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