Episode Title: Xeli: Denver Airport’s One and Only Therapy Cat

Episode Summary:
On this episode of Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies, host Karman Hotchkiss sits down with Nathan and Liane Pensack-Rinehart of Denver, Colorado. They are the pet parents—and handlers—of Xeli, Denver International Airport’s first and only therapy cat. Airport animal therapy programs—in which volunteer animals and their handlers roam terminals offering moments of furry bliss to weary, anxious, or stressed-out travelers—are popping up around the country, but most, like Denver’s, use mainly therapy dogs. That’s no deterrent for this 11-year-old, super-personable tabby. She loves dogs as much as people, and gamely shows up at the airport every month, making the travel experience of those who stop and meet her a paws-itive one.

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Episode Transcript:

Music: Daily Paws Theme Music begins

Karman Hotchkiss (VO):
Hello there! Welcome to Warm Fuzzies, a podcast from Daily Paws. I’m your host, Karman Hotchkiss, and today I’m speaking to Nathan and Liane Pensack-Rinehart of Denver, Colorado. Nathan and Liane are the pet parents of Xeli, Denver International Airport’s first and only therapy cat. Now, if you’re someone who flies a lot, you might have encountered therapy dogs at some airports you’ve traveled through. Or maybe even an occasional cat or therapy pig. At least 37 airports in the United States have programs set up in which volunteer handlers and their certified therapy animals wander the terminals. They offer free petting and temporary furry companionship to anyone who could use some relief from the tension of traveling. Denver has the largest airport animal therapy program in the world. How do we know that? Because in 2022, it was added to the Guiness Book of World Records for being so. Denver has more than 80 dogs on their squad—and, of course, one very cool cat named Xeli.
Karman Hotchkiss:
Welcome to Warm Fuzzies. I'm so excited about our guests today. I have never met them in the Denver airport, but from now on, you can be guaranteed that every time I fly through Denver I'm gonna be keeping my eye open. So, welcome, Nathan and Liane. Would you guys like to introduce yourselves?

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Sure, go ahead.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Sure. Yeah, so I'm Nathan.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
And I'm Liane (laughs).

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
And yeah, we are the cat parents of Xeli, the cat. Um, so Xeli is a registered therapy cat, um, and she primarily volunteers at the Denver airport with us. She's joining the Canine Airport Therapy Squad or the, uh, animal therapy team at the airport. The acronym is CATS, and she is the first and currently still only cat on the CATS team.

Karman Hotchkiss:
That's really cool. Before we go into further detail about what Xeli does at the airport, can you first tell us a little about her?

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
(laughs) Of course. Yeah. So Xeli, she's 11 years old. We adopted her when she was a kitten. She was only 3 or 4 months old when we got her. We adopted her just after we had adopted a Shiba puppy, and so, it worked out for both of them. He got used to cats, and then she got used to dogs really fast. Luckily, our other two cats were already used to dogs, and so there wasn't any problem there. We've got three dogs and two other cats. She's our youngest cat. Um, but she looks pretty good for her age. She's definitely one of the friendliest cats. She loves attention. She just loves sitting on people's laps, especially when we're at the airport, or climb on top of their luggage. Just sitting there, taking in everything, getting chin scratches.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Well, she sounds like a really amazing cat. What did she do that made you think this cat is special?
Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
We kinda joke around that she acts more like a dog than a cat. She was the first cat to learn how to use the dog door (laughs) and then, we had some friends over who actually weren't cat people, and I think that's kind of how the conversation started off, they were like, "Oh, well Xeli's a really cool cat." She'll just come up and jump on them, and like lay her head on their shoulder and just want to be pet, and so that kinda kicked off the conversation of, she would make a great therapy animal. Do they have therapy cats? And I think after we were talking to friends, Nathan kind of looked up, um, some therapy programs to see, right?

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
And then-

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. We were like, I know therapy dogs are a thing. Are therapy cats a thing? And any organization pet partners, turns out that, yeah, there's therapy cats, dogs, llamas, I think pigs, mini horses. So, yeah, options. We're like, "OK, you know, this is a therapy cat thing." Um, we were Googling around and found Pet Partners, that is an organization that, I think it was seven different types of animals they certify or register, rather, as therapy animals. They have, uh, llamas, mini horses, dogs, cats, I think pigs, couple other ones I can't-

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Rabbits-

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
... remember.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
... I think too.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Rabbits, yeah. (laughs) So like, "Oh my gosh, that's so cool." Like, "May as well try and see what happens. See if we can make the cut," and we did.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. So I think it was 2016, um, Nathan decided he was gonna go through the program with Xeli, to see if he could register to become her handler. And so, the program, you have to go through how to be an advocate for your animal. After he went through all those lessons there was an in-person test, um, that he had to go through with Xeli to make sure that she was fit to be a registered therapy animal. And so the test consisted of things like making sure she could sit on someone's lap for like five to 10 seconds, holding her while walking next to a neutral dog. Um, some other ones were..

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah, make sure like if there's a loud noise, or like a new place, she does fine, or if she does get nervous, right, she can recover quickly. Um, leave treats, type of thing.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Make sure she like doesn't eat the treats-

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
... and, um, was okay with like a crowd of people coming around her.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
I don't think I could pass.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
(Laughs)

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs) Right?

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah. And not be, like, too distracted with toys and things. Um, so she passed with flying colors, and so did Nathan, too. (Laughs) And so um, they started going to memory care units, I think, Nathan, you went like maybe once a month, twice a month. Um, and they would visit patients, in memory care units, they would like let Xeli sit on their laps, and they would just tell stories of, like, their childhood pet, especially their cats or their dogs, and, you know, it was so sweet because I think I remember Nathan telling me that, like, people would tell him the same story every time he came in, um, and so he kind of got to know like a few of the different residents
and stuff and, like, heard multiple times about their favorite animal that they remembered. So that was really cool.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
And even talking to people at the airport too who know about therapy programs, um, we mentioned the, you know, memory care facilities, and they're like "Oh, my gosh. Like, animals are the best in those environments, right?" Like, animals, they'll just sit there, they don't judge. And they're just happy, sitting on your lap.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
(Laughs)

Karman Hotchkiss:
It always makes me just tear up just a little bit, talking about that. So you're doing the memory care thing. How did the idea of going to the airport come about?

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. So, um, the commute where I generally would do the memory care was half an hour drive without rush hour. So after a while, I'm like, "Can we figure something out closer?" Pet Partners has a volunteer portal, where anybody looking for therapy animals, you know, libraries, whatever, uh, can just post requests. And I just happened, one day, to look and so we live 10 minutes from the airport, and I was shocked when I saw that uh... It said "Oh, Denver airport is looking for a therapy cat." Like come on, that's not real, right? (Laughs)

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
It's like perfect.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Uh, yeah, yeah. So I inquired. I did not know about the CATS program before, um, emailing them, but it turns out that the CEO of the airport at the time, uh, is a total cat fan and they're like, "Hey, I think she'd think it's amazing if you could get an actual cat on the CATS team." They weren't expecting much, I don't think, to come from this, just so happens that we're like, "Oh, we live super close to the airport, they need a cat, perfect."

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
She's registered.
Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
(laughs)

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
And so, yeah, it just kind of kicked off from there. And then when he started going, um, I decided I would also become a registered handler with Xeli. And so I went into the test as well so that I could accompany Nathan and Xeli at the airport. It was a little bit easier with two people. (laughs) That way, one person could kind of talk, the other can hold Xeli. And, all of the CATS, uh, volunteers, they all have trading cards for their animal. And so, um, while one of us is holding Xeli, the other is talking about the program, handing out...

Karman Hotchkiss:
Her business cards.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Her trading card as they like to call it.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Right.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. (laughs) so it worked out. And we've been doing that since 2018, uh, taking her to the airport about once a month for a couple hours, um, until, obviously, COVID hit, and then we took a small break. But it's resumed since then, and we've been going every month. (laughs)

Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Song Fades In

Karman Hotchkiss (VO): Right now we’re going to take a quick break, and when we come back, Liane and Nathan have more to reveal about Xeli and her work at Denver International Airport. Plus they’ll share how you can find them the next time you happen to be passing through.

Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Song Fades Out

(AD)

Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Song Fades In
**Karman Hotchkiss (VO):** Welcome back to Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies.

**Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies Theme Song Fades Out**

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
How do you identify or maybe Xeli identifies people who want to have a cat visit? Is it the cat hair on their clothes?

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Or are there other ways you can tell?

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
So we have matching vests with Xeli, and all the volunteers have them too, uh, at the airport. And so she's so small that we do carry her when we're walking. Um, her vest does say, "Pet me," on there. Although, it's kind of hard to see sometimes when she's being held. A lot of times, we'll just kind of try to make eye contact with people. If they are not looking at their phones, they kind of just give us a look, and, like, follow us with, um, their eyes, like, "Why is there a cat in the airport?" Usually, one of us will be like, "Oh, do you want to pet her?" "This is part of the Denver airport. We volunteer here." And that kind of gets the conversation going. Sometimes people are like, "Oh, no. I'm allergic to cats." While other people are like, "Yes, please. I need to pet a cat right now. I miss my cat so much."

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
And so usually once one person, uh, starts petting her and we start talking about the program, other people walking by will be like, "Is that a cat?" Right? Um-

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs) Yeah. They're like, "Oh, I have to pet this cat."

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
"I need to know what's going on." (laughs)

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
And so sometimes they'll rush over if they see us walking by, and they're like, "Oh my gosh. It's the cat. We've never seen her before." Like, "We're so excited." Uh, "We don't usually get to see her." And that'll just kind of draw people's attention to us, and then more people usually tend to come over, asking what the program is, and petting her. And it kind of just snowballs from there.

Karman Hotchkiss:
Yeah.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
And it's just as much with the employees as it is for passengers. Like it's stressful on both sides, right? We've been there during, I major cancellations and they're like, "Please, just come over and talk to both the passengers and us." (laughs) Yeah, it just gets you away from, yeah, whichever side you're on.

Karman Hotchkiss:
That's a really good point. I hadn't thought about the employee piece, but, um, yeah. They're doing stressful jobs, and many of them are probably away from their pets as well. Can you think of any particular stories about somebody that really made a connection with Xeli in a striking way?

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
I don't know that I had remember any very specific ones. What sticks to me is when they just see her, and then ask if they can, like, hold her. And then usually once they're cuddling, they all tell us, like, "Oh, I just lost my cat recently," or, um, "I've been away from my cat for so many weeks." And those are usually the stories that I remember the most. (laughs) We just let them have their moment with Xeli.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. And-and it's also interesting, you know, nowadays with smartphones, everyone at the airport are walking around, it's like, you know, looking at their phone, whatever but, you know, you could look at somebody and be like, "Oh, they're not, probably not, a cat person." Um, like, we were there a couple days ago, and there was this guy that, I'd be like, "Oh, he's probably not a cat person." This macho, big guy and the he's like, "Oh! A cat." So we're like, "Oh, do you want to pet her?" He was like, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Let's do it." And so she jumped on his lap, and he just opened up and was talking like the most friendly person, right? And you're like, "I would not expect that," but yeah. Just goes to show.
Liane Pensack-Rinehart:  
Don't judge a book.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:  
Yeah, exactly. (laughs)

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:  
(laughs) By its cover, right?

Karman Hotchkiss:  
Yeah. And-and that she brings that out from people.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:  
Yeah.

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:  
Yeah, exactly.

Karman Hotchkiss:  
Um, brings out their-their warmth and their humanity. That's a pretty great gift.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:  
For sure.

Karman Hotchkiss:  
Does she ever interact with the dogs who are part of the CATS Program?

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:  
Yeah. There's something that they have to stay away from other therapy animals, just as a safety precaution, but there are times where Xeli, like, she really wants to go and see the dog. She loves seeing the dogs. We have been, like, near some of them. She wants to go over to say hello, but, um, at the same time, she's like, "OK, whatever." She's just not phased at all. She's just like, "OK, This is just another big dog. It's fine." (laughs)

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:  
(laughs)

Karman Hotchkiss:
Her catlike-ness is coming out. Like, "Eh."

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
It's whatever.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
It does.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah, she knows she's special, for sure. (laughs)

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
I saw the photos of her with her vest on. And Xeli's vest, you have customized just a little bit. Um, can you tell us about the change that you made to her vest?

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah. So the airport made her vest with the S crossed out, so that it just says CAT.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
It's very cute, and people do notice it, and they point it out. They're like, "Oh, she's a cat. I get it." Canine Airport Therapy Squad, but cats. (laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Earlier, you mentioned when you were going through the certification program that one of the pieces of that was learning how to advocate for your pet. That really struck me. Can you tell me a little bit more about, like, what does that mean?
**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**

Yeah. So it's basically being able to tell when your cat needs a break, or your animal needs a break. Making sure that they're not getting overwhelmed. Our shift is two hours, sometimes it's a little bit over, just because it takes us more time to, uh, either get into the airport or get out of the airport, but you also just want to make sure that your animal isn't stressed, or tired. Xeli, we kind of know towards the end of her shift when she's getting a little bit, like, "OK. I'm done for today." Like, "I've-I've kind of hit my limit." And so being an advocate, knowing when to not let more people pet her so that she gets overstimulated and setting those boundaries, with people. We have been to the airport where there have been, a lot of kids, and while she does love kids too, um, sometimes if they all surround her and crowd, um, she's okay with it sometimes, but if it's towards the end of her shift, then we have to be like, "OK. Just, you know, take a step back." Um, "Pet her one or two people at a time," so, um, she doesn't get overstimulated or overwhelmed. And yeah. Just sticking up for her.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**

Yeah. And that's one of the many reasons why we like to go together. There have been times with, like, 10, 15 plus kids around her, and that's just a lot for any person to handle without a cat. So one of us can watch Xeli, and the other person can, like, play crowd control almost. And then it works out much better.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**

Yeah. That makes sense. And I love that description of just being more aware of your pet, just what their needs are in a moment. Tell us about Xeli's name? How did she get her name?

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**

(laughs)

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**

(laughs)

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**

So it's just a very random story. Um, when I was in high school, I used to play online games with my friends, and one of, um, my friends, her online game name was Xeli, and it just stuck with me. I just really liked that name. And so, um, when Nathan adopted her and we were trying to figure out a name, I just suggested it. She just looked like a Xeli. Although we didn't realize it would be such a difficult name to pronounce when you see it, because it's X-E-L-I, So yeah. It just stuck, and he liked it. And we were like, "Okay. Her name is Xeli from now on." (laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
I love that. So when we're traveling through the Denver Airport and encounter one of the therapy dogs or Xeli working, what should we know?

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
So I think the first two things come to mind for me, first of all, you might not always know they're a therapy animal, especially at the airport, right? There's TSA dogs, there's police dogs, like, you should not pet them.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Service dogs, service animals.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Always ask. Right? If you can pet the dog or be with the dog.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Cat.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
The other thing is like, if they are a therapy animal, they're there for you, Don't be scared of them, right? At the airport they're super friendly.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah. So just talking about the Denver airport's therapy dogs, they will all have the purple vest, just like their owners, but, um, I agree with Nathan, definitely ask before, just in case, you know, they might be on their way home. They might be at the end of their shift. Um, you never know. Another thing for therapy animals, just know, there is a difference. They are not service animals, so they don't necessarily have a service animal type job. So they can't go into restaurants and stuff, like service animals can. It's slightly different than an emotional support animal too. Emotional support animals tend to be for their owner, or that one person. Um, verses for therapy, uh, animals tend to be, again, like Nathan said, for others.

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
I appreciate that description. The difference between a therapy animal and a service animal.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
I guess, one of the most asked questions we get is like, "Is she on anything?" Like, "How do you make her so calm? How do you train her as a cat?" And to be honest, we didn't really train her. Like, this is just her personality. Um, and we do get that a lot of people who have said like, "Oh, I had a 'stripity' cat too, and they were just the sweetest." And so maybe it's-it's the stripity cats. (laughs) Um, but yeah. She just loves people and attention. And, um, yeah. (laughs)

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
And when we're not at the airport, I work from home. Um, so she is on my lap, you know? Whenever there's a meeting started, there's like a, you know, a tail up on my desk.

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
(laughs)

Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:
(laughs) "What's going on?" So all my coworkers know her as well. She shows up to all the meetings. (laughs)

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. When she's not, like, in here on his lap, she's definitely on the couch, or she is with the dogs, like, Not chasing them, but having them chase her and just teasing them. Or she's outside on the deck, sunning herself. (laughs)

Karman Hotchkiss:
So my last question to you guys, if I'm stuck in the Denver airport and I really need a Xeli dose, where can I find you guys?

Liane Pensack-Rinehart:
Yeah. So if you follow, um, Denver or Den Air on X, or Twitter, um, they usually post which therapy animals are on which concourse that day. Or, the day prior, because it's a volunteer program, we only are able to go once a month for a couple hours. And usually, you can find us on Concourse C. Sometimes we'll be at the main terminal, or we'll switch it up and be on Concourse A or B. But it's really easy to get through, um, in between all the concourses through the train at Denver airport. If you know you're going to be at Denver airport, uh, you can always just message us through Xeli's, uh, Instagram, therapycatxeli, um, and then we can always check
our schedules to see if we're available to stop by with her, to volunteer and just do her hours then. So yeah. There's a few ways, but, um, definitely check Denver Airport online.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
And if that's not enough options-

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
... um, if you also Google for Denver Airport CATS. All the profiles are online, so you can see Xeli, all the dogs. Um, there's an email address there, you can also email the airport.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Yeah. (laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Awesome. Well, I personally will be scheduling longer layovers in Denver from now on.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
(laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
And just in the hopes that it'll all align.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Sure. (laughs)

**Karman Hotchkiss:**
Nathan and Liane and Xeli, thank you so much for your time today. It's been an absolute joy to learn more about this program and to meet you. Thank you very much.

**Liane Pensack-Rinehart:**
Thank you so much for having us.

**Nathan Pensack-Rinehart:**
Thanks for the opportunity as well. Appreciate it.
Karman Hotchkiss (VO): Thanks for joining us for this episode of Daily Paws Presents: Warm Fuzzies. Be sure to follow us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. And we’d love your feedback. If you could rate this podcast and leave us a review, we’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at dailypaws.com/WarmFuzziesPodcast. We hope you’ll join us again next Thursday, for our final episode of the season. We’ll be talking with Sarah Bohan, who earlier this year rescued a tiny white kitten she spotted while running the Chicago Marathon. How that all transpired is an incredible tale you won’t want to miss. See you next week!