

GOOD FRIENDS COME TO VISIT

by Margaret DiCorletto

“I like to rub his head; he likes that.” Mr. Gray is referring to “Stormy,” a two year old Chow who is visiting him at the Northside Health Care Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Mr. Robert Gray, who wanted to have his real name used, has been wheelchair bound for the past 34 years as a result of injuries sustained in an auto accident. A resident of Northside for the past 4 years, he looks forward to the monthly visits by the three therapy dogs. “I think it’s great; I enjoy it every time they come.”

Recently Mr. Gray has had to spend more time in bed so “Stormy” sits in a chair close by where he can have his head rubbed and his ears scratched. Mr. Gray dubbed “Stormy” the “teddy bear” the first time he saw him as a puppy and reminds everyone that “he looked just like a teddy bear—you should have seen him.”

After spending some time with Mr. Gray, “Stormy” joins “Opie,” a seven year old Chow, and “Bronwen,” a Border Collie, as they make their

rounds, up and down each corridor, in and out of nearly every room. One frail lady greets each dog, pats it once on the head, and says, “Thank you for coming.” Each interaction is less than one minute, but each month this brief ritual is faithfully repeated. It is the only scheduled activity the woman participates in all month. Some residents want only a brief visit or a look from across the room while others want the dogs in their beds for hugs and kisses. During these interactions, some residents recall the dog or dogs they had at home. Recollections sometimes reflect pride; sometimes sadness as the owners tell about how smart their dog was at herding or hunting or how their dog died. Some residents have lost their ability to speak so their response may be only a



faint smile or the blink of an eye. The dogs never seem to mind. The slightest touch is enough to start a tail wagging.

Activity Director Suzanne Anderson says, “One of the things I like best about pet-facilitated therapy is it includes everybody. It’s the best one on one therapy there is, especially for the folks who can’t get out to join group activities. The residents look forward to the dogs coming and know the dogs will find them. They don’t have to leave their rooms. Sometimes family members or friends are present during visits, and they get to enjoy the dogs, too.” Administrator Mary Nell Stanley adds, “Staff need the visits as much as the patients. This is a very stressful job, and the dogs bring so much enjoyment to the staff as well.”



Stormy is one of four Chows who visit Northside on a monthly basis. The administrator has bragged to a colleague about the Chows who visit her facility, and the colleague was shocked, cautioning her that “Chows have a bad reputation.” Stormy also visits a dementia unit at the Veterans Administration Hospital as well as two other

local nursing homes. He rotates visits with his housemates, Molly and Katie, so that none of them are overly stressed. Molly, who has been doing pet-facilitated therapy for nearly ten years, also participates in programs about therapy dogs for community groups. Mister Bear's Oprah, better known as "Opie," is owned by Helen Blankenship, and they have been a visiting team for over two years.

These special Chows have earned the love and admiration of staff and patients alike because of their outstanding temperament and their excellent behavior. In addition to being well socialized as puppies, all have had a course in basic obedience and have been carefully evaluated by one or more of the national organizations that certify animals for pet-facilitated therapy. Two of the best known organizations that prepare and evaluate animals and handlers are Therapy Dogs International, Inc. and the Delta Society Pet Partners program. Both organizations require that animals be healthy and current on all vaccinations and licensing. A veterinarian must complete a health form for registration and renewal.

Therapy Dogs International, Inc. (TDI) is a New Jersey based organization dedicated to the regulation, testing, selection and registration of qualified dogs and handlers for the purpose of visitations to hospitals, nursing homes and facilities or any place where therapy dogs are needed. The TDI evaluation is an extension of the Canine Good Citizen test developed by the American Kennel Club for dogs who are particularly sensitive and attentive to people. Both purebred and mixed breed dogs are eligible for evaluation.

The Delta Society Pet Partners program provides training, evaluation, and registration of activity/therapy animals and their handlers. Activity/therapy animals are companion animals that are purposefully selected to be suitable for their visiting roles. Animals that can be certified include dogs, cats, guinea pigs, rabbits, horses, goats, llamas, potbellied pigs, chickens, and cockatoos.

Although many dogs are well trained, not all dogs are suitable for therapy work.

A good therapy dog should be friendly, outgoing, and adaptable. Facilities present a wide, and sometimes unpredictable, variety of people and events, and a therapy dog must remain calm and be under control at all times. The screening evaluations are designed to assess the dog's ability to follow basic commands, and also to determine that the dog's behavior is safe and reliable.

Therapy dogs often seem to have a special ability to sense a person's needs or limitations and adjust their behavior accordingly. Whether they are sitting quietly with one, gently nudging another, retrieving a ball or doing tricks, their presence offers a unique, non-threatening communication. They make no judgements or demands; they do not criticize or nag. One resident summed it up by saying, "It's like having a good friend come to visit."

As hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers, and schools open their doors to dogs and other animals, anecdotal information about the positive effects of companion animals on people is being supplemented with documented studies that examine specific behavioral and physiological changes that occur as a result of these

interactions. Studies have provided new information about how contact with animals improves human health and well being by reducing stress, alleviating depression, and improving the cardiovascular system. Whether it is called "magic" or "science," the bottom line is animals are good for you, especially if the animal is a Chow. ■

For additional information:

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