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Therapy, service animals make a difference across Erie region

Animals comfort residents

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Daisy Mae's dewy puppy-dog eyes are completely disarming. Charlie's tail wags with so much enthusiasm, his whole 75-pound body sways.

But behind their cute, huggable and lovable appearances, both pooches -- along with all the other therapy and service animals in the Erie region -- seem to know they have an important job to do.

Comfort. Help. Heal.

Daisy Mae, a golden retriever, and Charlie, a "newfie doodle" (a Newfoundland and poodle mix), are among the many animals used to comfort and motivate patients with varying physical and mental disabilities, as well as those with specific emotional needs.

The two dogs are trained and certified members of Therapy Dogs United Inc., an Erie-based nonprofit that provides therapy animal services in Erie County, Buffalo and Pittsburgh.

On Monday evenings, Therapy Dogs United's director and co-founder, Pat Van Zandt Christianson, and other group volunteers lead a couple dogs from room to room visiting with residents at Forestview Skilled Nursing Center, 2301 Edinboro Road in Millcreek Township.

The dogs -- Daisy Mae and Charlie among them -- quickly got to work, mostly by just being themselves.

"Over here, over here, baby," coaxed Angela Mastery, 91, from her wheelchair.

The residents tousled the dogs' ears, ruffled their lush coats and shook hands with paws.

In return, these 1-year-old pups gave kisses and tongue-lolling grins that left everyone smiling and laughing.

"I don't know what to say," said Jane Arrowsmith, 92, chuckling. "They're just wonderful."

It's usually the same reaction everywhere the dogs go, Christianson said. Something about the animals lifts people's spirits in ways nothing else could.

"What is that connection we have with dogs or horses?" Christianson said. "It's just so comforting to know it's a friend. It doesn't matter what kind of day you've had or who you are."

Many studies have shown the physical, mental and emotional benefits from using therapy animals, said David Rosswog, chief operating officer at Safe Harbor, an outpatient mental-health clinic. Rosswog spent three years researching animal-assisted therapy for his doctoral dissertation at Gannon University.

"Pet owners tend to get more exercise, experience less stress, require less medication, experience less cardiovascular problems," Rosswog said. "Just by petting an animal, it lowers your heart rate. It's soothing, it's calming."

There's not much evidence, however, indicating whether using therapy animals is better than other methods, he said. Safe Harbor hasn't used therapy animals in its sessions since about 2003, but Rosswog has seen therapy animals help patients open up and communicate better.

To be used in therapy, animals must be trained to stay calm in all kinds of situations. Dogs must pass several tests, such as the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen, to be certified.

Service dogs are protected under federal law and are trained for a specific function, such as seeing-eye dogs. Therapy dogs have a wider range of functions in order to provide comfort and support.

A good therapy or service animal, however, greatly depends on its natural personality.

Maggie, a yellow lab, can easily pick the most distressed person out from a crowd.

"She's just had this uncanny ability," said Yvonne Eaton-Stull, Allegheny College's Counseling Center director and a volunteer with the Delta Society Pet Partners, a nonprofit dedicated to improving health through animal-assisted means.

In addition to being a therapy animal, Maggie is also a crisis response dog for H.O.P.E.. Animal-Assisted Crisis Response, a volunteer organization that sends teams of animals and handlers into the aftermath of large-scale disaster situations, including fires, hurricanes and shootings.

Volunteers from the Erie region could be called to travel to East Coast states, including Maine, New York and Virginia. Eaton-Stull and Maggie were among the teams dispatched to Blacksburg, Va., shortly after the Virginia Tech shootings on April 16, 2007.

The dogs and their handlers provided a comforting presence for students unable to go home. When students finally returned to class, the dogs were stationed in lounges and toured classrooms to help ease the transition back.

"We were there to provide comfort and support," Eaton-Stull said. "It was very intense and there were long days, ... but they brought smiles."

Maggie makes regular appearances at Allegheny College (called "Mondays with Maggie") and other special events.

Especially during final-exams week, when stress and tension might be high for busy students. At a Delta Society Pet Partners one-night event at Brooks Hall, the atmosphere seemed much lighter as hundreds of students filtered in to pal around with several therapy canines and one therapy feline, Angel.

Seeing Maggie reminded freshman Aman Biswas, 18, of his own dog, Roly, back home in Thailand. And how much he missed her.

"They're obviously not people, but they do have a personality," he said while petting Maggie. "They become, basically, your friends.

"Like Maggie. She's a friend of mine now."

Eaton-Stull said more therapy and service animals are finding a place in counseling offices at schools across the country. It's a way to entice students to drop by, even if it's just to socialize with the animals.

As a result, quite a few students end up making an appointment to see a counselor about all kinds of emotional issues, including depression, social isolation, home sickness and anxiety.

If students are lucky, they might even see Ernie -- the new 9-pound, shaggy-haired counselor at Penn State Behrend.

The award-winning show dog-turned-service animal has only been on campus for about three weeks but has already become a celebrity. So much so that he's now nicknamed "puparazzi," said owner Sue Daley, director of personal counseling at Penn State Behrend.

Most days, the quiet 1-year-old affenpinscher ambles around the office or rests on his monkey-print pillow underneath a chair in Daley's office.

When he's in session, however, Ernie is specially trained to attend to psychiatric disabilities -- he's also able to pick up moods and instantly respond to the emotional needs of students.

Just looking at him is enough to make students feel better, Daley said.

"He's just a very nurturing little guy," she said. "He's small and you want to take care of him, even though he's doing more of that for you than you realize.

"He can distract you from your symptoms, and that can be very helpful."

The same could be said for horses.



Volunteers, about 500 in total, at the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center, or TREC, in Fairview teach equestrian skills throughout the year to adults and children with a range of conditions -- including cerebral palsy, autism, blindness, deafness and paraplegia.

"You'd never think they'd be able to ride by themselves, but they are. It's really exciting to see," said Kimberly Danylko, program director and community services coordinator for TREC. "The more they ride, the more it helps them."

Riding in general presents a subtle set of challenges -- riders must constantly work their muscles to keep balanced and stay on the horse. Simple commands, too, require leaning, tensing leg muscles and other body movements.

All these movements together help riders strengthen muscles they might not otherwise have the opportunity to exercise.

And each successful ride increases confidence immeasurably.

"If they're in a wheelchair or they're blind, people are always taking them around to places," Danylko said. Now, she said, "they're controlling something for a change."

At first Nick Vargo, 7, who has autism, wanted nothing to do with horses. He'd just repeat, "Horses bite, horses bite," said Diana Hooper, a Therapeutic Support Staff member for Youth Advocate Programs Inc. working with Nick.

"You couldn't talk him into it," she said.

No one would guess after watching Nick bob up and down on the back of a spotted black and white horse, Solomon, during a late-November class -- his grin clearly visible even from across the riding arena.

Out of the saddle, Nick still rode high on the excitement.

"I'm good," he said. "It's the best day ever."

Captions to TREC pictures:

Top picture: Zachary Walter improves his balance by riding backward on his mount, Nino, at the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center. Helpers Christine Schafer, left, and Tammy Gurlea assist Zachary as he rides around the ring.

Bottom picture: Amanda Burlington improves her balance while riding her mount, Annie, at the Therapeutic Riding Equestrian Center in Fairview Township on Nov. 24.