

Therapy dogs must be tolerant of being approached and touched by strangers (opposite, clockwise from top); Harriet Campbell, a Homewood at Williamsport resident, greets Muffin; Therapy dog Heather Lynn helps psychologist Lou Lichti's patients open up.

paws for Health

Therapy Dogs Make Their Rounds to Enhance Healthy Progress and Offer a Listening Ear.

When volunteers Laura Schwartz and her partner, Jack, make their rounds at Frederick Memorial Hospital, the mood on the floors they visit is instantly lifted. Patients smile as they welcome Jack — always clad in his official Delta Society vest with photo ID badge — whose kind brown eyes and patient demeanor bring comfort to all he visits. He's a real pro, and Laura is content to let Jack take center stage and work his magic. As Jack settles in next to elderly patient Frances Cover, her face lights up and she speaks only to him. "Well you're a little sweetie, aren't you? Gracious sakes, do you like grandma? What a friendly little fella!"

Jack is a registered therapy dog, and the Jack Russell terrier/Chihuahua mix regularly visits the hospital with his owner, Laura, through the Wags for Hope program, which has been active at FMH since March 2009. Laura, Jack and the other Wags for Hope handler/dog teams have become eagerly anticipated visitors. "The whole floor looks forward to the dogs' visits every week," says Lori Taylor, R.N., who has come in to see Oreo, a black-and-white, long-haired Chihuahua accompanied by her handler, Sylvia Nye. "Everyone's mood is lifted, the patients and the staff, when we know the dogs are

by Kelly Z. Conrad
+ photos by Jason Turner

coming.” But the visits do more than provide a little cheer. “We’ve seen patients’ blood pressure readings go down after they’ve had a visit from Jack — even the most anxious patients,” says Lisa Clabaugh, activities coordinator at FMH.

BOW-WOW BENEFITS

Anecdotal evidence of the beneficial impact animals can have on the health of their human companions dates back centuries. In “Notes on Nursing,” first published in 1860, Florence Nightingale observed, “A small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick.” Today, the role of animals in enhancing human health, supporting recovery from sickness and encouraging participation in therapy is supported by numerous formal studies; the practice has been formalized through animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities. “During animal-assisted activity, people pet the dog or hug the dog,” says Ray Ward of Delta Society, a national organization that promotes positive

interactions between people and animals and certifies therapy animals. “But in animal-assisted therapy, the dogs work with licensed therapists in helping, for example, brain surgery patients develop motor skills. Studies have shown that by just having a dog present during physical therapy, people will work harder toward their goals.”

To that end, hospitals and many nursing homes and assisted living facilities are incorporating animals as part of the therapeutic process. In Washington County, Ravenwood Lutheran Village, Somerford House, Broadmore Senior Living and Homewood at Williamsport are among facilities that offer animal visitation programs. Homewood boasts a live-in handler/therapy dog pair — Ann Ford and her Bichon Frise, Muffin — who have been registered with Therapy Dogs Inc. since October 2006. The pair primarily works with Homewood’s independent living residents but have also visited area schools.



Charlie Cook, a patient at FMH, gets a visit from Jack during a Wags for Hope session.

Certified Canines

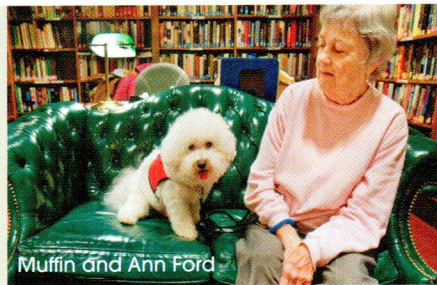
Both Dog and Handler Must Pass Evaluation to Become Registered Therapy Dog Teams.

The first step to becoming a therapy dog team is contacting a registering organization to determine specific criteria and evaluation details. “Not every dog can be a therapy dog,” says Ray Ward of Delta Society. “The dog must have a very calm temperament, no barking, no jumping.” Any breed or mix with the proper temperament can be a therapy dog; Ann Ford’s dog, Muffin, for example, was a shelter dog from the Washington County Humane Society. Therapy dog teams work in a variety of settings, so organizations will look closely at not only the animal’s personality and behavior, but the handler’s as well.

An evaluator meets first with the handler, then with the potential handler/dog team. “The evaluator will determine if the handler is in control of the dog,” Ann says. Evaluators consider a variety of factors: Are the dog and the handler both well groomed? Can the handler control the dog in a variety of situations? Does the handler correct the dog positively when needed? Is the dog polite? Does the dog sit quietly and allow people to talk? “During my testing

with Muffin, the evaluator dropped a heavy steel pot on the floor to see what Muffin’s reaction would be to a sudden, loud noise,” Ann says. “I nearly jumped off my chair, but Muffin didn’t seem to mind.” The evaluator also pushed a wheelchair and a walker toward the dog to see what the reaction would be. Muffin didn’t flinch.

The dog also has to tolerate being approached and touched by strangers in many different settings. “He has to be okay with somebody coming up and ruffling his ears,” Ann says. Most organizations require therapy animals to be at least one year old since the behavior of younger animals can be unpredictable, and young immune systems are not yet fully developed. A veterinarian must verify that the dog is in good health and up-to-date on all shots. Once the dog and handler are approved, most organizations will have new teams shadow more experienced teams at first, as they visit hospitals and nursing homes. Visitation is generally twice a month for one to two hours per session.



Muffin and Ann Ford

At FMH, Wags for Hope volunteers stop by various wards, including the Oncology Surgical floor. Visitors one day include Laura and Jack and Sylvia and Oreo. Also present and eager to work are Doc, a sleek greyhound with his owner/handler Mary Kueberth; Raven, a large, shiny-black mixed breed and her owner/handler Margaret Phillips; and Bosco, a hefty Rottweiler with his owner/handler Kristina Hoffmann. Patient Cheryl Lamb has requested a visit from the dogs, so Sylvia leads a scampering Oreo down the hall toward her room. “Dogs stay with you when you’re sick, so you’re never alone,” Cheryl says while cradling the tiny Oreo in her lap. “It’s a win-win for everyone,” adds Amanda Changuris, hospital communications specialist. “The patients love the program, and the staff loves it. Even visitors, especially children, love it.”

LOVEABLE LISTENERS

While some therapy dogs are visiting hospitals and nursing homes, others make regular visits to schools and libraries at story

“Everyone’s mood is lifted, the patients and the staff, when we know the dogs are coming.”

time to offer a listening ear. First launched in 1999 by the nonprofit Intermountain Therapy Animals, the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program has registered hundreds of therapy dogs and their owner/handlers across the U.S. and Canada. Based on the idea that fear inhibits learning, R.E.A.D. therapy dogs help children read better by sitting quietly and listening as a child reads aloud to them. Dogs as reading companions are less intimidating than other children or adults, so children can relax and read at their own pace, comfortable that they will not be judged or criticized.

Jack and Laura participate in R.E.A.D. at C. Burr Artz Public Library and various Frederick County elementary schools. “When kids participate in the R.E.A.D. program, not only does their reading proficiency improve, but their overall school attendance also improves,” Laura says. “Sometimes, if a child has trouble with a sentence, I’ll say, ‘Would you mind reading that again? Jack didn’t quite get that.’ They know at some level that Jack doesn’t understand what they’re reading, but it’s easier to read it again for the dog.”

Therapy dogs also offer a non-judgmental ear for children — and adults — to open up about difficult issues during visits to a psychiatrist. Heather Lynn, a small Cairn terrier, has been a pet therapist for six years (almost her entire life), working at City Park Psychological Services & Associates in Hagerstown with her owner, psychologist Lou Lichti. Certified by California-based Love on a Leash, Heather Lynn takes

Patients know a dog will not judge them or criticize them.

her job very seriously — and even has her own page on the office website. She enthusiastically greets every client in the waiting area, then leads the way to Dr. Lichti’s office, where she jumps up on the sofa and waits for the client to sit.

Dr. Lichti calls Heather Lynn is a “positive distraction” for clients. “I’ve found that while clients are petting her, they’re better able to express difficult emotions,” she says. “Heather Lynn facilitates talking without the client getting fidgety or self-conscious. I like to think I’m pretty nonjudgmental, but clients seem to have a deeper comfort level with Heather Lynn. They know she isn’t judging them and won’t criticize them.”

This seems to be particularly true of children. “Sometimes children are angry or resentful that they’ve been brought to a therapist and will be expected to talk about their feelings,” Dr. Lichti says. “But when Heather Lynn runs out to the waiting room, they perk up and forget how angry they were. During session, Heather Lynn is distracting enough that while they’re engaged with her, I can ask the tough questions.”

Dr. Lichti explains that adult clients who were sexually, physically or emotionally abused as children often remember the family dog as the only one in the household they could trust. Heather Lynn reminds them of that childhood dog. “I’ve had clients tell me they chose my practice solely because they saw Heather Lynn’s picture on the website,” Dr. Lichti says. At that moment, Heather Lynn hears the next client in the waiting area and — recognizing that duty calls like her many eager therapy dog counterparts — sits up, alert and ready to help. ♥



Visit Online Exclusives for a listing of local and national therapy dog organizations.