

LOVE Comes With Four Paws



Carol McCaulou with therapy dog Poquito at Gypsy Glen K-9 Kastle in McHenry. *Photos by John Konstantaras*

Therapy Dogs Bring Smiles To The Faces Of Patients

By ELIZABETH HARMON

At Centegra Hospital in McHenry, Katherine Fenillan (a certified therapeutic recreation specialist who works in the rehabilitation center) and her dog, Joey, have a place they need to be. But getting there takes time.

Everyone wants to say hi to Joey.

In a waiting area, an elderly woman smiles quietly and strokes Joey's head. Another woman smiles and coos at the 6-year-old Sheltie, who proudly wears his own volunteer tag. In another hallway, two white-coated pharmacy technicians have lots of questions; in an elevator, a man in scrubs and a surgical cap greets him by name.

"He brings a smile, breaks up the day, gives us something else to (think) about for a little while," says Joyce Commo of McHenry, who works in the medical records

department.

Hospitals can be stressful places for both staff and patients, but Centegra's Caring Paws program helps ease tension and boost morale. The program has 42 volunteer handler and dog therapy teams that visit patient rooms, physical therapy areas, waiting rooms and even staff offices.

Joey and his fellow volunteers are as popular with patients as they are with staff. Bonnie Saban, manager of volunteer services, shares a story of a young child brought to the hospital for a series of blood draws.

"The child was very distraught, and the therapy dog's handler saw her and approached the mom," Saban says. "The child was able to concentrate on the dog. The dog went in with them, and the mom said that thanks to the dog, the visit went completely differently from previous visits."



To qualify as Caring Paws volunteers, both dogs and handlers must take part in the Delta Society Pet Partner workshop (a training and evaluation program) offered at the hospital. Dogs are evaluated on obedience skills and behavior. Handlers are evaluated as well. "Both the dog and the handler have to be really good with people," Saban says.

“It’s nice to see how (the dogs) really brighten people’s day.”

Kathy Reiland, co-owner of Gypsy Glen K-9 Kastle in McHenry

The classes take place three times a year and cost \$100. The next course will be Feb. 19 and 20 at Centegra Hospital in McHenry. For more information, contact Bonnie Saban at 815-759-4768.

After the teams successfully complete the Delta Society program and Centegra’s own volunteer education program, the dogs are issued volunteer IDs with their name and photo. They also have calling cards to leave behind with patients. The bookmark-sized cards have become collectibles with rehab patients, Feuillan and Saban say.

“They’re like baseball cards,” Saban says. “People take them home and put them on the refrigerator.”

To prepare for his work as a therapy dog, Joey attended a series of basic and advanced obedience classes to learn basic skills and socialize. Feuillan also took him to public places to get him comfortable with different situations.

“They need to get used to strange sounds, smells, even getting touched by patients without full motor control and being around medical equipment,” Feuillan says.

Before each visit, therapy dogs must be bathed, have their nails trimmed and be given mouthwash. Visits to patient rooms are allowed with doctor permission only.

Along with spreading cheer, some of the dogs actively participate in therapy. “They help with physical goals by building endurance,” Feuillan says. “Patients work on bending over to pet or brush them. They walk the dogs or play catch with them. It’s very motivating, and when the patients are less focused on their pain, they can stand longer and walk farther.”

Kathy Reiland of McHenry knows all about the healing power of animals. The co-owner of Gypsy Glen K-9 Kastle Pet Resort is a lifelong animal lover who has volunteered as a therapy dog handler for more than 20 years.

Visiting nursing-home residents with a yellow lab named CJ was deeply rewarding, Reiland says.



Kathy Reiland with therapy dog Poquito at Gypsy Glen K-9 Kastle in McHenry.

“It’s nice to see how they really brighten people’s day,” she says. “Dogs are so smart; they can tell when someone is having a bad day.”

Reiland is training her Chihuahua mix, Poquito, to visit local nursing homes.

“Some people like the big dogs, some people like little ones,” she says.

Poquito, 4, is participating in obedience classes and became comfortable around medical equipment while visiting Reiland’s father, an Alzheimer’s patient, in an Evanston

assisted-living facility.

“My dad always liked dogs, so he would brighten up when I brought the dog in,” Reiland says.

Poquito brought comfort to Reiland’s mother, too.

“He could tell when my mom was depressed and would go sit on the couch next to her, even though he wasn’t allowed up there,” Reiland says. “We finally put a cover on it for him, and my mom said, ‘You really know how to work it, don’t you?’” *mc*