

in their
Debt

By Jen Reeder

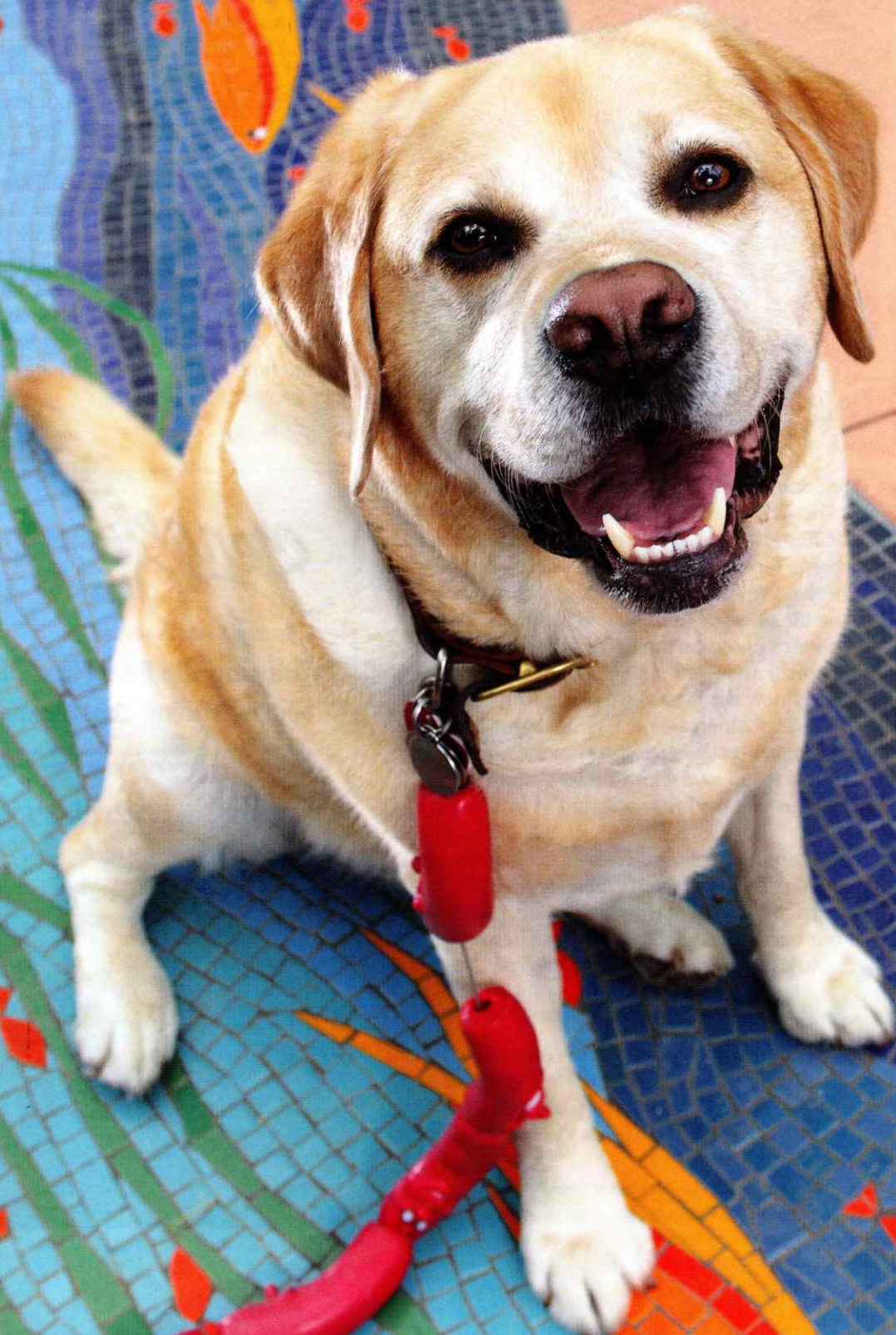


PHOTO COURTESY OF JEN PETIT

Thor

Therapy Dog **THOR:** HERO TO KIDS

While recovering from open heart surgery, a little girl walked down a hospital hallway with her surgeon. When they encountered a therapy dog named Thor, the doctor offered a stethoscope to the child so she could listen to the yellow Lab's heart.

Thor's handler, Phyllis Lanphier, watched her try to locate the heartbeat near his rear.

"The doctor kept saying, 'No, you need to move it a little more forward...a little more forward,'" she recalled. "And the minute she got to his heart, she just beamed."

Such special moments are all in a day's work for Thor. The seven-year-old Lab has volunteered for five years with the PetSmart Paws for Hope Canine Therapy Program at Rady Children's Hospital-San Diego in Southern California, which named him the 2020 Canine Volunteer of Excellence.

Thor and 17 other dogs in the program visit approximately 20,000 children in a typical year. Patients range from one year old to early twenties, from teens with eating disorders to patients with cancer to medically fragile children who require 24-hour nursing care.

"Every visit is different," Lanphier said. "Sometimes a visit can entail helping a child walk – they hold the leash and that helps to motivate them. Some visits are just emotionally uplifting, and they bring happiness into the child's day."



Phyllis and Thor

Since hospitals can be a scary place for young people and their families, therapy dogs offer a chance for normalcy, she said. Before entering a room, Thor's volunteer escort (his buddy, Diane Nelsen, who keeps track of which patients request visits) asks the child if they'd still like to spend some time with a dog. This allows them to be in control of something at a time when they can't typically say no to anybody else. When the answer is



yes, Lanphier asks where the child would like Thor, such as the floor, on the bed, on the sofa, or on the chair.

"If he's in a chair but he has to put his paws on the bed to get close to a child, he will do anything to stay in that position," she said.

Thor, who is a registered therapy dog with the nonprofit Alliance of Therapy Dogs, doesn't wear a vest so that children can run their fingers through his fur. He does wear a badge and gets very excited whenever he sees it because he loves his job.

"He's exhausted afterward, but he loves it. His motivation and his reward is the praise," she said. "I would describe Thor as a really sound, hearty, true Labrador. He's good with family and children – that's obviously true to his breed."

Because Labs are America's most registered breed, many people share photos and stories of their own Labs, as well as other dogs at home. "That's one of the really nice things about the program: The dogs bring them outside of why they're in the hospital and into their own happy world of home," she shared. "It feels like everything's okay because there's a dog walking through the hospital."

Lanphier typically takes Thor on rounds twice a month for two-hour shifts. When the therapy dog visits had to pause at the onset of the pandemic, the teams were sorely missed by patients, family, and staff, according to Madelyn Hornstein, coordinator of volunteer services and the therapy dog program at Rady Children's.

"The canine program volunteers were the first to come back after being furloughed for 18 months," she said. "When we brought all the canines back to test one Friday, there was just this joy and lightness to the entire crew that I missed."

Sometimes she fills in as an escort for the therapy dog teams and only hears positive feedback about the program. Some parents tear up when they see their child smile for the first time in a few weeks. "The stories are really, really quite authentic to hear how it touches their hearts and their families," she said. "It's a patient satisfier

and an employee satisfier. It's so sweet to see the smiles and hear the laughter."

Sylvie Sneep, manager of human resources and volunteer services at Rady Children's, agrees. She said the program has grown over the past 30 years since a pediatric surgeon named Dr. David Collins first started bringing his dog to comfort patients recovering from surgery. Now the program creates trading cards for each dog on the team, which handlers give to patients, who in turn often decorate the walls of their room with them.

The cards share fun facts such as the dog's favorite treat and hobbies. Sneep said Thor and Lanphier – and her previous therapy dog, a yellow Lab named Banner – inspired the trading cards; Lanphier used to make personal greeting cards with photos of her dogs for the children they'd meet.

It's one reason why Thor was named the 2020 (and 2019) Canine Volunteer of Excellence. "We really wanted to recognize Phyllis and Thor for all the things that they do and have done," Sneep said.

For her part, Lanphier feels the biggest reward is the chance to share her dog with families facing daunting challenges with grace.

"I always say it's a gift back to me because I see the strength and the courage of the children and the families, and it's just incredibly humbling," Lanphier said. "It's a total gift to volunteer." 🐾

For more information, visit: www.rchsd.org/programs-services/canine-care-program.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at www.JenReeder.com.