

BUCKEYE PAWS

Labs excel in therapy dog program
for medical staff at The Ohio
State University.

Dr. Beth Steinberg and Brienne.



A nurse takes a break from a hectic day to rub the belly of a yellow Lab, Radar. As she pauses to grin at Radar's handler, ReNea Owens, the dog wags his tail even harder and waves his paws at the nurse as if to say, "More belly rubs, please!"

It's the signature move for the therapy dog, one of six Labs and 38 dogs participating in the innovative Buckeye Paws program at The Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center. Unlike many hospital therapy dog programs devoted to stress relief for patients and their families, Buckeye Paws therapy dogs offer comfort to more than 22,000 medical professionals – including more than 5,000 nurses and 2,000 physicians.

Radar was the fourth dog to join the program, which launched at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020. After an initial three-month pilot program with two dogs – including a yellow Lab named Brienne – proved successful, with no infections or other issues, Owens jumped at the chance to volunteer with Radar.

She's a physical therapist and associate director of ambulatory rehabilitation at the medical center, and knew the staff was working hard in extremely challenging conditions.

"We were having a lot of hospitalizations. There was a need to take care of those who were taking care of others, and I thought, 'This is a great way for me to be able to give back to other employees,'" she recalls. "Radar loves to be around people and get his belly rubbed. So I thought, 'This is perfect.'"

Of course, offering therapy dog visits was more complicated in the early days of the pandemic. Two veterinary epidemiologists at the university assured the

team that dogs weren't at risk of catching Covid-19 from contact with people, so handlers like Owens donned protective gear and headed out with their dogs for visits.

During rounds to different floors to allow the staff a break, Owens could see the immediate difference Radar and other Buckeye Paws dogs made for morale when they entered a workspace.

"They were all working and really serious," she says. "But when the dogs would come in, you would see a smile on their faces. Some of the staff would come over, sit on the ICU floor and just hug the dogs, start crying. They'd say, 'I feel so much better now. I'm going to be able to get through this day or get through this week.'"

Radar, who is now 11, also visited nurses working in isolation units on critically ill patients – albeit from behind a protective window. Even through the masks and protective gear, Owens could tell they were smiling.

"You can always see a smile in their eyes," she says.

Research proved her right. A 2024 study of The Ohio State University's Buckeye Paws program found that positive mood nearly doubled among clinicians who engaged with the program. Participants also reported experiencing an immediate decrease in stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout.

Beth Steinberg, Ph.D., RN, associate director of research for OSU's Center for Integrative Health and co-founder of the Buckeye Paws program, wasn't surprised by the results. She'd seen the positive impact of the program while volunteering with her own yellow Lab, Brienne.

"As soon as we started rounding with these four dogs, the requests were overwhelming," she recalls. "We were like, 'Oh my goodness – we're going to need more dogs.' People were just overjoyed."

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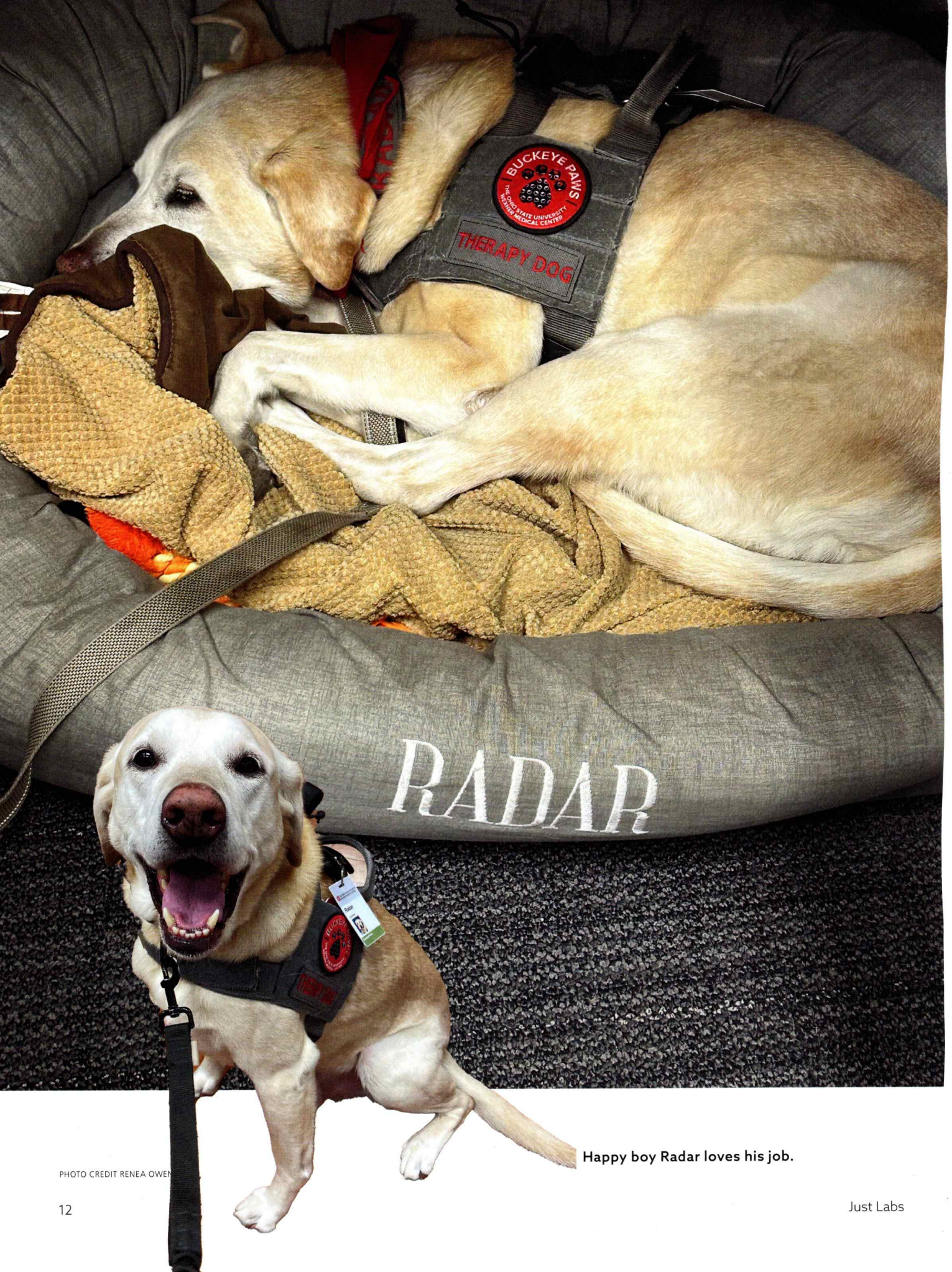


Brienne and College of Nursing students.

PHOTO CREDIT RENEA OWENS



ReNea Owens and Radar.



Happy boy Radar loves his job.

PHOTO CREDIT RENEA OWEN

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They were also grateful. In one memorable encounter, a nurse practitioner spotted Brienne and ran down the hall to greet her. She dropped to the floor, petting the Lab and crying for about 45 minutes. Through her tears, she told Dr. Steinberg that her beloved uncle had contracted Covid-19 and was put on a ventilator in her ICU unit, but he hadn't survived.

“Brienne just snuggled up to her while she cried,” she says. “The dogs just instinctively know when they're needed. It's the most amazing thing to see.”

Buckeye Paws continues to expand to try to meet the needs of the massive healthcare team. Dr. Steinberg is thrilled that the team recently added two black Labs and a chocolate Lab, and believes Labs excel as therapy dogs because of their dispositions.

“First of all, they're adorable and they always look happy,” she says. “They're just so connected to people.”

All dogs on the team have been warmly embraced by the medical staff, who collect Buckeye Paws trading cards for each therapy dog. A whopping 6,000 employees bought Buckeye Paws t-shirts to show their support.

“We have a lot of employees, but it is difficult to go through the medical center now and not see people with Buckeye Paws shirts on,” Dr. Steinberg says with a chuckle.

She's happy that the program has been such a success. In fact, the Buckeye Paws team works with other medical centers and universities to help them create similar programs, including Boston University and the University of Vermont Medical Center.

“The bottom line is if you have a healthy and well bedside staff, you're going to give better patient care because your cup is full,” she says.

For her part, Owens feels “fortunate” that she and Radar can be part of Buckeye Paws. The Lab comes with her to work most days to give extra support to the members of her team and in meetings.

In one meeting of managers, Radar refused to lie down as he typically does. Instead, he kept returning to a specific manager. Owens would call him over, but he'd look her in the eyes and return to the manager. After the meeting,



the manager told Owens that her family's dog had died the night before. She was grateful that Radar picked up on her distress and wanted to comfort her.

“She told me, ‘He knew that I was upset. He knew I had to pay attention in the meeting, but he also knew that he had a job to do in comforting me. And I'm going to tell you, this has been the best meeting ever because Radar sat beside me the whole time,’” she says. “He's good at what he does and he loves it.”

At home, Radar is a goofball who frolics in the backyard and barks through the window at passersby. But in his vest at work, he never barks. He just sighs contently during a good belly rub or whines with excitement when a new friend pets him.

Owens – whose love of Labs runs deep thanks to past pets Chance and Mattis – loves seeing her Lab spread so much comfort and joy through Buckeye Paws.

“It's very rewarding for me because I'm sharing a very special dog with people who are caring for others,” she says. “Sometimes it's the best part of my day being able to see my personal dog at work making a difference in other people's lives.” 🐾

For more information about Buckeye Paws, visit: <https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/features/buckeye-paws-program>. Buckeye Paws Study: <https://medcraveonline.com/IJCAM/the-impact-of-an-animal-assisted-activity-on-healthcare-worker-well-being-in-the-inpatient-hospital-setting.html>.



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America and a member of the DWAA Hall of Fame. 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.