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Mercy Medical Center patient Brittany Richardson says hello to Chatter, a therapy dog visiting last week. Mercy is currently in search of new therapy dogs and will offer preparation classes starting Jan. 29. / Photo by Steve Eginore

Calling all ‘super dogs’ Mercy puts out call for therapy dog recruits

by Jen Reeder

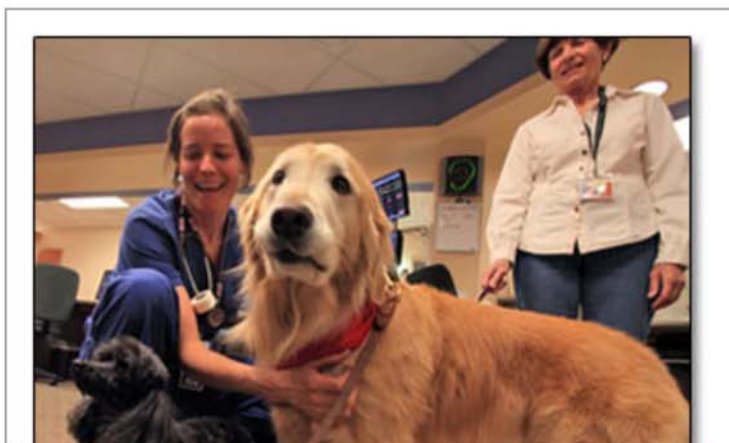
Administering chemotherapy to children can present unique challenges. Some kids cry or refuse to be touched because they don’t fully understand what Julie LaBadie, an oncology nurse at Mercy Medical Center’s Cancer Center, is doing, and why she has to poke them with needles. So it makes her job easier when volunteers arrive with therapy dogs, or “Mercy Super Dogs,” to offer a distraction.

“When the dogs come into the room, I’m pretty much able to do what I need to do with ease,” LaBadie says. “It decreases the stress or anxiety of being here.”

Usually, the patients at the Cancer Center pet the therapy dogs. But one 5-year-old, who cries until the dogs arrive, likes to put Band-Aids on them.

“It has really helped,” LaBadie says. “He doesn’t feel like he’s doing his treatment alone.”

For more than a decade, the Mercy Super Dogs have been comforting patients at the center as well as noninfectious



patients throughout the hospital.

“It helps to make a sterile place more normal,” says Holli Pfau, a volunteer whose golden retriever, Chatter, has worked as a therapy dog at Mercy for 1½ years. “Our job is to go in and put smiles on people’s faces, and the dogs know how to do that.”



R.N. Brianne Marshall says hello to Chatter and Clementine, two visiting therapy dogs. Studies show therapy dogs have the ability to reduce stress and boost spirits among hospital patients./Photo by Steve Eginore

Before entering a room, Pfau asks the patient if they’d like a visit with a therapy dog. If the answer is yes (it usually is), Pfau moves a chair next to the bed so that Chatter can sit at eye level with the patient while they pet her. Sometimes, patients ask if the 55-pound dog can get into bed with them, like a man who explained there was plenty of space because his leg was amputated. Another time, Pfau and Chatter met a woman in a hallway whose family member was dying. The woman absentmindedly touched Chatter’s head, and the dog curled up and lay down on her feet.

“Things like that take my breath away,” Pfau says. “The dogs have this amazing sense of what’s needed, what’s wanted right at that moment.”

Amy Daniels, volunteer services coordinator at Mercy, has been working with the therapy dog teams for 3½ years and says the program benefits patients and visitors as well as hospital staff.

“It’s that jolt of unconditional love that you can give to a warm soft fuzzy,” Daniels says. “The pets will go into the office areas and visit staff – I know that they really look forward to that.”

Volunteer Penelope Fisher, who brings her toy poodle, Clementine, says the therapy dog teams often receive requests for visits that are relayed by nurses or friends of patients who intercept them in the hallways. Fisher’s first special request was from the mother of a teen-age girl recovering from a car accident.

“She said, ‘Please don’t miss visiting with my daughter. She’s in the physical therapy room right now learning how to walk again,’” Fisher says. “So we went in there, and (the daughter) loved the visit. She sat down in her wheelchair so the dog could get on her lap.”

The Mercy Super Dogs and their handlers visit the hospital several times a week and on holidays. Because the dogs are so popular, there’s an ongoing need for new recruits – a need that is particularly acute this year.

“This last year we’ve lost several dogs that have passed away, which is a huge loss not just for their owners but for the whole program,” Pfau says. “We always need to bring in new people with nice dogs who want to share them.”

Durango resident Gail Gardner, the evaluator for Therapy Dog International (TDI) who started the local therapy dog program in rest homes in 1985, will test potential therapy dogs March 5. She says friendliness is just one trait therapy dogs need to possess; obedience is another. The revised 2013 TDI certification testing includes challenges dogs would encounter in a hospital setting, like maintaining a heel on a loose leash when encountering a person on crutches, or someone waving their arms and shouting.

“It takes a very stable dog,” Gardner says.

Volunteer Gay Robson says her schnauzer, Zeke, enjoys being a certified therapy dog. “He loves the attention,” Robson says. “I think the only downside for Zeke is the bath that he has to have every time he goes.”

Therapy dogs must be cleaned before hospital visits and wear an identifying TDI bandana around their necks. Their handlers must carry identification and have had an annual flu shot (a requirement for any volunteer in Colorado hospitals). TDI mandates that handlers refrain from feeding treats to dogs in the hospital so that their focus remains on the patients, not food.

Robson says the work can be extremely emotional, gratifying and even funny.

“It’s always something different. I never know what to expect – it’s not boring,” she says.

In addition to all of the anecdotal success stories of therapy dogs, there have been numerous studies illustrating the health benefits of animals for humans. In 2012, the American Journal of Cardiology published a study that found people with chronic disease and pets had more adaptable heart rates, and the International Journal of Workplace Health Management published a study that found dogs lower workplace stress. In 2004, scientists at the University of Missouri-Columbia found that humans who pet a dog for 15-30 minutes during a study saw their blood pressure drop by 10 percent (while the dogs’ blood pressure dropped as soon as the humans began petting them).

But most people who have seen the therapy dogs in action think something more intimate is going on. Dr. Michael Demos, staff cardiologist at Mercy Cardiology Associates, brings his certified therapy dog, Mello, a black Lab he rescued in Idaho, to his office every day. Mello is comforting to patients, often sitting with particularly sick people.

“There was this one lady in the exam room, she was sitting off by herself. He went over to her and very gently put his chin on her knee because she was so sad,” Demos says. “If there’s a really sick patient, he’ll stay by them – he won’t move ... He can sense these things in people. I don’t understand it, but he’s just the way he is.”

Pfau says it is a privilege to be invited into a patient’s room at a time when they are vulnerable, and to watch her dog connect with them.

“There’s a lot of research out there that over the last 20 years has substantiated the benefits of the human/animal bond, and the human/animal interaction – blood pressure and reducing stress levels and all of that – but I still think there’s a little touch of magic that can’t be quantified and I’m just always happy to watch it happen.”

TDI evaluator Gail Gardner will test potential therapy dogs March 5. Preparation classes for the test (not required) start Jan. 29. For more information, contact Gardner at butterflies@frontier.net or 247-6350, or visit www.tdi-dog.org.

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