

Local organization brings pets to the elderly

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

As the red Dodge Caravan pulled into the parking lot of the Kirkwood Corner in Lee, N.H., Missy lifted her snout off of the window and her tail began to wag. She knew they had finally arrived and it was time to get to work.

The gorgeous chocolate lab with glittering brown eyes, and her owner, Stephanie Adams of Lee, N.H., arrive promptly at the Kirkwood Corner, an assisted living home in Lee, every Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. to brighten the days of all the Kirkwood residents.

"As soon as Missy sees me pick up the tote, her tail starts to wag and she starts to cry," says Adams. "She knows exactly where we're headed."

As soon as Adams opens the door, the "milk chocolate" lab, as called by Adams' husband, hops out sniffing the ground as her tail wags with delight. Her head is held high with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth as if she is smiling.

"Missy, come here," says Adams putting the medium-sized, white and navy blue tote onto the pavement as she reaches inside. "We have to put your collar and scarf on."

Adams pulls out a red bandana with a picture of the head of a dog and human in front of a mountain; the words "Pet Partners" sit under the picture.

Pet Partners is a national registry that entails volunteer training and testing of both the animal and its handler. The program can be held at any local pet therapy service, like Missy's ElderPet located in Durham, which facilitates the relationship between elderly, people with disabilities, patients at healthcare facilities, and pets.

Adams puts the bandana around Missy's neck to identify her as a therapy dog. She also puts a red collar on her and connects her red leash to the collar.

"We start in the dining room and just walk around, talk to some people, see if they want to pet Missy," says Adams. "Sometimes people don't feel up to it, so we just move on to the next room."

The dining room seems to be Missy's favorite place as she sniffs around looking for crumbs and food that have been dropped on the floor, but that does not distract her from her real job.

Missy is one of thousands of dogs in the United States that is certified and trained to be therapy dogs, and participates

in animal assisted activities in nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living homes and even elementary schools.

"Hello, would you like to pet the dog?" says Adams as she makes her way to each of the residents in the dining hall.

An elderly woman who is lying back in her chair immediately sits up with a smile.

"Oh, what a beautiful dog," she says as Missy kisses her hand. "She's a nice dog."

After Missy visits with the residents in the dining room and gets a taste of a fallen waffle, she and Adams continue into the next room.

"I try to wake them up," says Adams. "But if they're really asleep, I just move on. Sometimes their eyes are closed but if I can get their attention they really enjoy petting Missy."

Two of the major pet therapy-registering companies in the United States include Therapy Dogs International, located in Flanders, N.J.; and The Delta Society, located in Bellevue, Wash., which ElderPet is affiliated with.

Therapy Dogs International is a volunteer organization founded in 1976 by Elaine Smith, according to Rob Houston, a TDI representative.

"We provide therapy dogs of all sizes, breeds and ages to nursing homes, schools, hospitals and assisted living homes," says Houston. "When the dogs go to the nursing homes, it's like they're brightening the residents' days. Kind of reminding them of the good times. Some of the dogs we have include Chihuahuas, Saint Bernards, pit bulls... the list goes on"

"Oh I think they're doing exercises in here," Adams says as her and Missy walk through the kitchen into another room. Here, Sharon Newton, the activities director at Kirkwood, is leading nine residents in a series of exercises.

Missy makes her way to four women sitting on the right side of the room who love Missy's company.

"There's nothing like dogs," one woman says, petting Missy and laughing as she gives her kisses.

"Can I get a towel for you to wipe your hands with?" asks Adams. She always keeps a bag of hand wipes in her tote just in case residents are bothered by Missy's frequent licks.

In this room, Missy shows her true doggy skills with a trick involving a doggy treat.

"I can't give her too many because her tummy has been bothering her lately," Adams explains to the observers. "I'll give her just one, though."

As Missy and Adams make their way down a corridor to the elevator, Adams recalls different ways that Missy has exuded unique therapy dog traits at home.

"We have a hamster at home," Adams explains. "When we let it out of its cage, it tends to crawl up and down Missy's back, but for some reason Missy just lays completely still and let's the hamster do that. It's like she knows that if she moves or rolls over, she could kill it."

This is just one way that reassures Adams of Missy's unique ability to know exactly how to act in certain situations.

Throughout their visit, Missy is overjoyed and excited, constantly wagging her tail. She also knows when it is time to be calm, patient and respectful of her owner and the residents.

"Sometimes I stop and chat with people, have some good conversations," says Adams. "Missy knows when I chat so she just lies down and relaxes, stays calm."

As Adams enters the room of a woman who she normally gets into conversation with, Missy lies down and briefly closes her eyes. As soon as Adams is ready to move onto the next room, she gives a gentle tug on Missy's leash and Missy hops right up with the same amount of energy she had from the start.

Making their way down the hall, they enter the room of an elderly man who absolutely adores Missy. When Adams and Missy enter the room, his eyes light up and he turns his body with enthusiasm so he's facing Missy.

"How about Missy shows you a trick?" asks Adams.

Missy lies down and rolls over on Adams' command, tail still wagging and tongue hanging out the side of her mouth. Although it took her two times to roll over, the resident's priceless smile was worthwhile.

As Missy and Adams make their way down the elevator and past the office, they make one last stop in the dining room just to make sure no one would miss out on Missy's visit.

"Even though we do hour-long visits," says Adams, "I like to check the dining room one last time on the way out since it's right here."

Missy had one last visit with a Kirkwood resident and then said goodbye to the Kirkwood Corner until the following Tuesday.

"It's really amazing how effective the pet therapy is on people," says Adams. "There was one time when children came to Kirkwood to do arts and crafts

with the residents. I brought Missy and there was one boy who was petrified of her; he wouldn't go near her. After the boy saw all of his friends petting Missy, and the residents petting Missy, and once he saw how gentle she was, he came right over and started petting her. I remember his mom coming up to me and thanking me."

TDI also has a program called Tail Wagging Tutors. This is a program where dogs go into classrooms or libraries and sit while children read out loud.

"The dog is kind of like a non-judgmental audience," says Houston. "It won't judge the child if he or she makes a mistake."

Since TDI has been established, it has gotten extremely good responses and feedback across the board, says Houston.

"It's especially great during the holidays," says Houston. "Sometimes we have the dogs dress up in different costumes. The clients really love that."

No matter how successful TDI becomes, it is constantly trying to educate the handlers

and train their dogs the best they can. There are members' guides and DVDs for all of the handlers. The evaluators who train the dogs go through rigorous training to make sure the owner can handle the dog in any type of situation, says Houston, just like the Delta Society.

"When dogs are evaluated, they are put in different situations so the evaluators can see how they react," says Houston. "We put them near wheelchairs, bring them into a room where people are screaming, and bring them around hospital machines and young children."

TDI also has a test called the CGC, the Canine Good Citizen test, sponsored by K9 Advantix. This test was designed to analyze the behavior of the dogs.

So far, TDI is closing in over 14,500 handlers, and 16,000 to 17,000 therapy dogs in all 50 states, and it continues to grow each year.

"We're just glad that these animals can provide emotional support for people in need," says Houston. "It's amazing."

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