



Cleveland Clinic Patients Respond to Canine Companionship

BY STACEY BOMSER

WHEN IT COMES TO PATIENT RECOVERY, canine companionship may be just what the doctor ordered. Ever since Cleveland Clinic Florida introduced its pet therapy program, patients and hospital personnel welcome the weekly visits from these four-legged friends.

Weston resident Corinne Cott initiated the program at Cleveland Clinic about six months ago. She first began providing pet therapy with her dog Sophie about a year ago, visiting senior centers and other institutions. "She has such a gentle soul. I just had to share it," explains Cott.

She brought the idea to Stormie Neale, coordinator of volunteer services at Cleveland Clinic Florida. Cott says Neale was receptive to the idea but what really sealed the deal was when she had to step out of the office for a few minutes. "Sophie was surrounded by people and was so gentle and loving to them all," explains Cott. "Stormie came back in, saw this, and said 'we have to do this.'"

That's a decision she does not regret. "We are thrilled to offer this program which facilitates our patients' healing," says Neale. "The therapy dogs provide compassion and support and reduce the anxiety and stress of being ill. They spark pleasant memories of patients' pets, which instantly boosts their mood and makes them feel better."

With each visit, Cott sees first-hand the healing power of pet therapy. "It's as helpful for the visitors as for the patients," she says, while sharing the story of a recent visit. Cott and Sophie stopped by the room of an elderly woman recovering from a stroke. "Her husband was distraught and uncommunicative. He would not leave his wife's room. The daughter-in-law saw Sophie and asked us to come in. The man had been leaning against the window, but the minute he saw Sophie they bonded. He hugged her for about 20 minutes. It really cheered him up."

And cheering up patients, as well as visitors, is exactly what the pet therapy program is supposed to do. These caring creatures deliver unconditional love during their weekly visits.



Corinne Cott and her dog Sophie initiated the pet therapy program at Cleveland Clinic Florida.

wants to stay with patients who are very ill."

Cott has noticed this in Sophie as well. "Dogs have a keen sense. They know when something is not right with someone. They know when someone needs their love and attention."

Sometimes attention is all a patient needs; something to take their mind off their illness. That's why many patients have an instant connection to these canine caregivers. "I found that when patients see Sophie they don't show me pictures of their children; they show me pictures of their pets," says Cott.

But not every pet is cut out for pet therapy, explain the ladies. Dogs must have a special demeanor. "The dog has to be gentle and sweet. They can't be afraid of things or spook easily. They must master basic commands, and they must pass the Canine Good Citizen test," explains Prezioso, who had Buddy certified by the national organization Therapy Dogs Inc.

Cott says she knew when Sophie was still a puppy that she would make an excellent therapy dog. As soon as Sophie was old enough, she enrolled her in a certification program. "She had to learn eleven commands, including come, stay and wait. But the two that were most important for work in a hospital were leave it and drop it," explains Cott, who continues to work with Sophie daily to reinforce her training. This includes trips to the neighborhood Publix. "We go up and down the aisles.

Sophie knows she can't pass the cart. To her it's like a wheelchair. She also waits at the end of each aisle until I tell her it's clear to go."

The training is hard work, but for Sophie and Buddy the end result is well worth it. Both owners say their dogs love providing pet therapy. "When he sees me get his vest out he comes running," notes Prezioso. "Buddy loves his job."

In addition to their work at Cleveland Clinic Florida, Sophie and Buddy are also enrolled in other pet therapy programs. Sophie visits senior centers and may soon start making visits to a pediatric unit at an area hospital. Buddy visits veterans' hospitals and nursing homes, but one of his greatest loves is his role as Buddy the Reading Dog at Manatee Bay Elementary School.

Prezioso says Buddy is part of the Paws-itively Reading Program. First grade students read out loud to Buddy, which helps boost their confidence and reinforce their reading skills.



Barbara Prezioso and Buddy are involved with various pet therapy programs, helping hospital patients as well as struggling students.

"Patients take comfort in petting him, kissing him and cuddling with him," says Weston resident Barbara Prezioso, who recently joined the pet therapy program at Cleveland Clinic with her dog Buddy. "He's so little he can go into a patient's bed and snuggle with them."

Both Prezioso and Cott say they and their dogs get just as much out of the pet therapy program as the patients. "Every time I walk out to my car after a visit, I'm so glad I did this," notes Cott, who tries to go at least once a week.

"I gain so much myself," shares Prezioso. "It gives me tremendous gratification knowing that we are making others happy and that people feel better just by Buddy's presence. But, I believe Buddy gains from this experience too. He



The response to the pet therapy program at Cleveland Clinic Florida has been phenomenal. Patients react favorably to the weekly visits from these canine caregivers.