

On the Positive Side

Therapaws connects the ill with furry friends

By Charlene Curry

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As my dog, Promise, and I walked into the La Posada hospice facility that Friday morning my mind was not on the visit I was there to make, but on the call I had received that morning with the news that my other dog, Ellie, was losing her battle against cancer.

My friend, Sandra, and her French bulldog, Cosette, were waiting for me. I took a few moments to tell her about the test results. As we were talking, a woman came into the La Posada lobby and, seeing us, said, "Oh, you've brought the dogs! Please visit my mother in room five. She loves dogs so much and will be so glad to see you."

We told her we would make a point of finding her mom and began our visit.

We visited several people and then found ourselves at room five. When I looked in, there was a priest at the woman's bedside. If not for her daughter, we would have passed by, but knowing she enjoyed dogs we entered the room. I said, "Hi, we hear you like dogs and Cosette and Promise are here for a visit." Sandra lifted Cosette so the woman could see her. Then we heard the woman's soft voice say ... "Touch." Sandra gently placed Cosette on the bed and the woman began to stroke Cosette's soft head. I knew my 80-pound girl, Promise, was too big for the bed so I pushed up a chair and Promise jumped up and leaned toward the woman so that she, too, could be touched. The woman reached up and softly petted Promise's neck then whispered the single word I will never forget ... "Magic."

This hospice patient had, in just two words, summed up all that I have learned in the 13 years I have been doing canine-assisted therapy visits. There is a special magic that comes with a visit from one of our therapy dogs. Suffering, sadness, depression, loneliness all seem to disappear, if only for a short while, when our four-footed friends appear on the scene.

Therapaws, a local therapy dog program started in 1992, makes visits to local assisted-living communities, Memorial Medical Center, special-needs classes in many LCPS classrooms, the Southwest Rehab Hospital and La Posada. Teams are registered with Therapy Dogs Inc.

TDInc provides registration, support, and insurance for members who are involved in volunteer animal-assisted activities.

My Ellie has been gone for more than a year now, and I have such wonderful memories of our 11 years together. Many of the best memories are of the extraordinary experiences we shared on our Therapaws visits. She brought happiness not only to her family, but also to the hundreds of people she met in her 10 years as a therapy dog. But my stories are not unique.

If you were to talk with any of the members of our group, they would be quick to share their own unique experiences where they watched their own special pet bring joy to someone who just needed the special magic that can come from a furry, four-footed friend.

Do you think canine-assisted therapy visits would be a great fit for you and your dog? We welcome new members. Dogs of all kinds can be wonderful therapy team members; they simply need to be well behaved, enjoy meeting new people and tolerate other dogs.

You can learn more about TDInc at therapydogs.com or contact me at (575) 524-2026 or e-mail me at therapaws@gmail.com to arrange to observe a Therapaws visit.

Charlene Curry is a tester/observer for Therapy Dogs Inc., a registered tester for the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen's Program, a member of the Rhodesian Ridgeback of the U.S. and is active in Rhodesian ridgeback rescue work. Anyone interested in adopting a rescue ridgeback can contact her.