

LAS CRUCES SUN-NEWS

On the Positive Side: Therapaws program offers companions

By Win Jacobs / For the Sun-News

Posted: 01/31/2010 12:00:00 AM MST

Have you ever known someone who has problems? Who doesn't! What a dumb question! If the problems revolved around adjustment to change or low self-esteem, physical or psychological impairment, or just plain loneliness, one of the elements of help may well be walking around on four feet. Dumb animals sense and respond to needs that lie too deep for words. Certainly there are obstacles to be gotten over. Just as certainly, there can and should be times of joy.

Consider the elder placed in a nursing home, the Down syndrome child mainstreamed in a public school's classroom, the abused child placed in foster care—each for reasons having much to do with the individual's good, each potentially isolating and depressing.

Or the latchkey kid whose single parent must work, the patient in rehab after surgery or other dramatic medical intervention. Professional skill and good intentions can go a long way - but not all the way, in too many cases.

Here in Las Cruces, enter Therapaws, which brings volunteers and their certified canine companions to visit nursing homes, schools, the Boys and Girls Club, hospitals, or any public place where their motto "Sharing Smiles and Joy" can help. The volunteer chats with the visatee - taking special note of pictures or memories of animals left behind - while the "paws" snuggle and lick, or do tricks, or just stand for stroking, according to the host's (and the institution's) wishes and rules. In schools or clubs, the visitor often reads aloud while the non-verbal activity goes on as above.

This is but one instance of animal therapy which is an increasingly recognized part of adjustment and recovery. Not long ago, this column ran an account of "Horse Camp," another local, much beloved resource.

The local Therapaws is a unit of Therapy Dogs Inc., headquartered in Cheyenne Wyo., started nearly a quarter of a century ago. Locally, Therapaws has been organized for over 15 years.

Admission to the ranks depends upon observation and testing of the dog, for obedience to owner's commands and general congeniality. The human participant must commit to and show proof of current shots and examination, as well as congeniality at least as great as the dog's. More information about Therapy Dogs Inc. can be found at www.therapydogs.com

Interested individuals should contact Charlene Curry by e-mail at therapaws@gmail.com or call 575-524-2026 for more information. Annual registration in the program is \$25. To view calendar visits scheduled for Therapaws, click [here](#).

Win Jacobs is a member of the Humane Society of Southern New Mexico and serves on their board of directors.