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THE DOG DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

At Hospice, Look Down for Some Uplifting Cheer

BY DEBORAH SALOMON

Special to The Pilot

Santa's helpers come in a variety of sizes, shapes and appendages. Some are pot-bellied elves with pointy ears. Others, the four-footed kind, bring gifts far more precious than the latest electronic device — love, licks, a paw or a wagging tail — to patients, families and staff at FirstHealth Hospice House.

They are calm. They are quiet and gentle. They are therapy dogs — so valued that their services are listed on the Hospice House website, alongside the interfaith chapel.

Meet Millie, Dama and Cody with their pup-mommies, Anne Krahnert, Sarah Johnson and Julia Goodrich. Millie and Dama are Australian Labradoodle sisters, while Cody is an uncommonly laid-

back West Highland terrier.

“My friend Sarah was going to pick up her puppy, leaving just one from the litter,” Krahnert says. Lonely after losing Duffy, the Krahnerts’ 150-pound Newfoundland therapy dog, Anne adopted Millie.

To see them is to smile, especially

see **HOSPICE DOGS**, page A4



TED FITZGERALD / The Pilot

Julia Goodrich with ‘Cody’, Sarah Johnson with ‘Dama’ and Anne Krahnert with ‘Millie’ visit FirstHealth Hospice House.

Hospice Dogs

From Front Page

dressed in Christmas gear, as they will be today.

The dogs visit Hospice House on a regular schedule, implemented by volunteer services manager Kerri Mlynczak. They stay as long as it takes, visiting the rooms of patients or families who have requested a little doggie-affection. Occasionally a session is arranged to coincide with visits from children, to brighten the occasion.

Medicare stipulates that 5 percent of patient contact must be delivered by volunteers. Therapy dog owners help fill this requirement.

Literature and lore document stories of dogs who, sensing a master's illness, stay close. Pet therapy benefits were first documented in 1960, when a child psychologist observed that having his dog sit in on sessions seemed to calm young patients. This led to methods of identifying, training and certifying suitable dogs.

The National Alliance of Therapy Dogs reports that dogs provide emotional support and physical comfort, often reminding patients of their own beloved pets. Blood pressure, even pain, may be reduced during and after a visit. Faces relax, become animated.

Here, dogs are permitted to sit on a chair beside the bed and place a paw on the railing. "The biggest benefit for this population is the tactile stimulation," says Maggie Bonecutter, Hospice and Palliative Care liaison.

Therapy dogs' owners must also possess certain traits, often born out of personal experience: "My mother and a dear friend were patients here," Sarah Johnson says. "I wanted to get involved, so I went through the training, which is

rigorous" and not suited to some. "You know your own character, whether you can work around patients."

Therapy dogs also visit patients at FirstHealth Moore Regional Hospital and FirstHealth Cancer Center. Nursing homes and senior residences often have a house cat.

Prospective volunteers and their therapy-certified dogs are interviewed/assessed by Mlynczak; if accepted, volunteers must complete 12 hours of hospice training. The ones that succeed work two-hour shifts, entering only rooms that have requested a visit. This year, Christmas coincides with Anne Krahnert's shift.

"I'll be here," she says.

"The dogs seem to find the person who needs them the most," Mlynczak notices.

Sometimes, that will be a staff member. Bailey Marona, a registered nurse, is a hospice specialist.

"It can be sad and stressful here," Marona admits. "The dogs (and volunteers) don't know how much they mean to us."

Even more to the families, Bonecutter adds, since the patient may be sleeping or unresponsive.

Julia Goodrich recalls a patient who opened her eyes at the sound of Cody trotting through the door. "She asked me to stay longer." Another confided, "Cody makes me feel normal."

The dogs seem to enjoy the visits; Goodrich reports that Cody gets excited when his special vest comes out, meaning that he's off to "work."

But whether these pups understand the nature or importance of their work — who knows? Only that, on Christmas afternoon, their soft brown eyes will be friendly, eliciting smiles that linger and wipe away, if only for a moment, the tears.

Contact Deb Salomon at debsalomon@nc.rr.com.