

## THE WONDER OF THERAPY DOGS

BY JAN SODERSTROM



On November 25, I proudly posted this message on, with a picture of the certificate from Therapy Dogs Inc. I cannot thank DAR and Pat Wheeler enough for their role in our "journey" to become a Therapy Dog Team. As a result of joining DAR in 2011, I started to volunteer at the VA and observed the

wonderful interaction between the patients and the dogs. On one occasion, I accompanied Pat and her dog Lawrence as they made the rounds of the rooms upstairs. I can't begin to tell you what a moving experience this was for me. I decided right then and there that I wanted to do this with my Miniature Poodle Bijou. When I retired on January 31 of this year, I had two projects for 2013: "unjungling" my garden, and becoming a Therapy Dog Team with Bijou.

Pat is now a Tester/Observer with Therapy Dogs Inc. which is headquartered in Cheyenne, WY. They provide support, testing, registration and insurance for over 12,000 teams in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. While Pat was going through the process of becoming a tester for TD Inc., I started working with Bijou to prepare her for her new role. We started going to the Welcome Homes with Pat and Lawrence to condition her to all the new sights and sounds---crowds, fire trucks, police sirens, a LOT of motorcycles, and of course, the other therapy dogs. I enrolled her in a four-week agility class at the East Bay SPCA to build her confidence. Although it is not required, I heartily recommend having the dog pass the AKC Canine Good Citizen Test. The SPCA also offers a four-week course covering all 10 items on the test. Since Bijou knew most of the items already, I trained her myself on the other test items. I borrowed a cane and a walker from a neighbor and walked around the house with them for a couple of weeks. I enlisted the neighbor kids to be the "crowd" we had to walk through politely, and to try to distract her by running past us from all directions. (They REALLY got into that one!)

In September, Pat was approved as a Tester for TD Inc., and things moved into high gear for Bijou and me. First was a vet exam for heart worm and fecal tests. The dogs have to be on flea, tick and heart worm medication year-round and must have an annual negative fecal exam, as some parasites can be transferred to humans. They also have to be current with rabies. Bijou passed the AKC Canine Good Citizen test on Sept 15. I don't know who was more nervous--I wanted her to pass so badly, and she was nervous because she could hear all the dogs barking in the SPCA. It was a big relief when we passed; the TD Inc. test includes some, but not all of the AKC CGC components. We then went to a board and care home in Livermore with Pat and Lawrence to see how she did with canes, walkers and wheelchairs and residents who are typically more frail. Bijou was not afraid of the wheelchairs, and at one point jumped up on the couch and laid next to a lady to be petted. We were now ready to move on to the actual test, which was a three-day process. Day One was the obedience test followed by a site observation at a nursing home. Day Two was a site observation at another care facility. Day Three was the non-medical site observation which was the veterans celebration at Las Positas College. Bijou interacted with the other therapy dogs, soldiers in uniform and a gaggle of preschool children who surrounded her and were petting her all at once. One little girl, a REAL dog lover, came back about 10 times to pet her and told me "She likes scratchies best."

So now Bijou and I are an official team. She has her official therapy dog tag and I will soon order a vest for her. The dogs learn that the vest means they are working and people gravitate to the dogs when they see the vest. Bijou will have three badges to start---the TD Inc. badge, the AKC CGC patch, and the Diablo Valley Petting Pack badge. (Kinda like doggie Girl Scouts). As we continue our journey together I look forward to adding badges for years of service and numbers of visits.

I would love to see other DAR members become Therapy Dog Teams. This fits in perfectly with our goals of community service, especially the Welcome Home celebrations for our soldiers. The dogs go up to honor the soldier and all dogs who help the military in so many ways---in the field, as assistance dogs for disabled vets, and as therapy dogs in treating PTSD and depression. JHL is so honored and blessed to have Pat and her passion for therapy dogs. She has opened up a wonderful new world for me and I hope there are others who can benefit from her experience and expertise.