

PETS

Successful Tails: The Wonders of Therapy Dogs

Patricia H. Wheeler

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Four Stars (out of Five)

Healers come in many forms. Some wear white coats, other have wagging tails. Many of the latter are celebrated by Patricia H. Wheeler in this uplifting book about therapy dogs and the people they help.

Wheeler is an experienced educator and counselor who has been a handler of therapy dogs for more than ten years. During that time, she and her black Labrador retrievers, Lawrence and Albert, have visited hundreds of clients of all ages, from young children attending grief camps to elderly folks living in nursing homes. *Successful Tails* is Wheeler's ambitious attempt to collect as many stories and pictures as possible from her clients and other therapy-dog handlers she has worked alongside.

Wheeler takes the reader on tours of places that tug at the heartstrings, like Livermore Manor, where Lawrence comforts an Alzheimer's patient who was so touched by the dog's presence that his family asked Lawrence to attend his memorial service. Other dogs, like the gigantic Newfoundland named Chex Mix, offer a lapful of furry dog head to pet.

It must have been a daunting task for Wheeler to gather the hundreds of caregiver testimonials, client quotations, pictures, stories, and poems that fill her book. She gives shape to these materials by grouping them in chapters that cite the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive benefits for each client population, whether school kids learning to read while resting on a dog's warm belly, or hospital patients coaxed out of their rooms by dogs in search of treats.

Each chapter starts with an informative, somewhat tedious recitation of the program's location, mission, and services. The introductions are followed by stories about the miraculous bond between humans and dogs. The stories are overwhelmingly positive, and readers may wonder about the challenges of bringing dogs into so many new situations. Wheeler addresses the question briefly when mentioning the types of dogs that tend to be appropriate for this kind of work—gentle and intelligent breeds like shepherds and Labrador retrievers—and the screening process that happens before the dogs are allowed to work with strangers.

Wheeler's story is one in which canine comforts triumph. The dogs are the stars of the stories, as evidenced by their detailed biographies, complete with portraits. Wheeler loves dogs, and it would be nearly impossible to come away from *Successful Tails* without sharing that affection.

Sheila M. Trask