

Therapy Dogs Honored for Service at the Veterans Administration Hospital

By Patricia Koning

What do a bernese mountain dog, cocker spaniel, standard schnauzer, boxer/great dane mix, two golden retrievers, and three labs have in common? They are all volunteers with the Livermore Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital's therapy dogs program who were honored on Saturday for their hour spent being petted, wagging their tails, and just spreading joy to veterans.

It was also a time of sadness to remember Bob Flores and Harold Swartz who passed away last year. Both men were U.S. Army veterans and long time volunteers for the VA as therapy dog handlers and in many other capacities. The program also lost two therapy dogs—Jiffy, a yellow lab, and Patch, a golden retriever. Jiffy was honored with a posthumous award for 500 hours of service.

Eight dogs, including Jiffy, were honored for their hours volunteered. Nicole Alioto, the district director for Congressman Jerry McNerney, presented each handler with a certificate of commendation from McNerney. "We applaud the dogs and handlers for providing an uplifting and joyous experience for so many veterans," she said. "Thank you for taking the time to give back to those who have sacrificed so much."

Rio, a bernese mountain dog, was welcomed into the program and Miles, a golden retriever, earned the rank of First Class Petting Officer for 50 hours of service. Bailey, a 2-year old lab mix, and Belle, a cocker spaniel, earned the rank of Chief Petting Officer for 100 hours of service. Three more Chief Petting Officers earned pins for 150 hours of service: Belle, an English cocker spaniel mix, Schnoz a standard schnauzer, and Thunder, a boxer/great Dane mix.

Lawrence, the Livermore Lab, received a pin for 750 hours of service. Lawrence, a Captain, was the first dog in the program. "I've been told that after 1,000 hours of tail wagging, he'll be promoted to rear admiral," said Pat Wheeler, Lawrence's handler/owner and the first volunteer in the VA therapy dog program.

C. Winn Crannell, a retired VA physician's assistant, says the program is a tremendous success and brings a great deal of comfort



to the participants. "With their quiet, gentle ways, their unconditional love, their wonderful sense of what precisely is needed (extra attention or just a quiet presence) the patients who are agitated are calmed, those who are withdrawn are drawn out, those who need love but don't know how to ask are loved completely," she wrote in a letter that was read at the ceremony.

The letter described some remarkable responses witnessed during her time as a physician's assistant: "Residents who have not responded to anyone or to any outside stimulus reach out to touch, usually tentatively at first, then with increasing interest and enthusiasm. Individuals smiling and laughing when there has been only anger or sadness, and sometimes the therapeutic shedding of tears long overdue. Feelings being shared by those who have remained silent. The obvious comfort of a patient as he or she enters the last days or moments of their lives."

Wheeler says some of the most emotional experiences have come at the deathbed of a veteran, when a visit by a dog brings about one last flicker of joy. She recalls how Lawrence stood watch over a veteran who had recently passed. "A veteran that Lawrence knew well had died. His body was on a gurney in the hallway," she said. "Lawrence dragged me over there and sat down in front of the gurney and did not budge for a half an hour until the body was moved. He just knew he needed to do that."

The Livermore VA Therapy Dogs program is coordinated through the Valley Humane Society (VHS). To participate in the program, dogs need to undergo a health screening and behavior check. The handlers attend a volunteer orientation and complete on-the-job training, a process that usually takes at least a month.

VHS has a total of 120 volunteers in its pet therapy program working at senior centers, programs for disabled children, and Paws to Read programs at libraries



Dogs in the photos are Jiffy (the yellow dog) and Lawrence the Livermore Lab (the black dog).

in Pleasanton, Danville, and Livermore. There are about 20 dogs and handlers volunteering at the VA.

While half of the dogs in the program are golden retrievers, suitability depends more on the individual dog's temperament than on breed, says VHS general manager Wendy McNelley. "The dogs need to be polite, well-socialized and able to interact with other dogs," she said. "Volunteers make a commitment of four hours a month for at least six months."

The size of the dog is not a factor. In fact, McNelley says that larger dogs sometimes are better because they can stand at eye level with a bed or gurney. That's good news for Dan Schack and his 140-pound bernese mountain dog, Rio.

Schack, who lives in Tracy, decided to train Rio as a therapy dog because he elicits a strong positive reaction in everyone who sees him, especially children. In fact, he carries with him "frequently asked question" cards about Rio with information like his breed, age, weight, and favorite activities.

For the past two years, Schack and Rio have been volunteering in senior homes and children's programs in Tracy and Lodi. "I

don't know who gets more out of it—me, or Rio, or the people we are visiting," he said. "It is incredibly rewarding to see the joy Rio can bring out in people."

Wheeler is working on a book about the Livermore VA therapy dog program. She hopes to finish it this summer, in time for publication before the holidays. Donations to support the production of the book should be mailed to the Valley Humane Society, 3670 Nevada Street, Pleasanton, CA 94566. Indicate "VA book" on the memo line. VHS is a 501(c) 3 organization and donations may be tax deductible. All proceeds from the book will support the VHS therapy dog program at the VA hospital.

The Livermore Public Library is currently signing up children for its Paws to Read program, which will take place every Wednesday night through March 20. Participating children should not be fearful of dogs or have allergies to pets. Call the Livermore Public Library's Children's Desk at 925-373-5500, ext. 5504.

For more information on Valley Humane Society and its pet therapy program, visit www.valleyhumanesociety.org or call (925) 426-8656.