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The Healing Power of Therapy Pets

by Lisa A. Beach

Two years ago, a yellow Labrador named Maddie was an abused dog left on the side of the road with her ten puppies. They were taken to Canine Soulmates, a foster group in Hurst, and four-year-old Maddie got a second chance when her handler Jane Nolan adopted her.

“There have been studies done that show the simple process of petting a dog or hearing a cat purr can release endorphins that benefit a person’s state of mind.”

- Dr. Brian Benjamin, Ohio Drive Animal Hospital, ohiodriveanimalhospital.com

temperament and a very kind heart.” explained Jane. “You can’t always find dogs that are mellow, sweet, and approachable.”

Dr. Brian Benjamin of the Ohio Drive Animal Hospital in Plano agrees that a good temperament is key for a therapy animal.

“A therapy animal shouldn’t have any trust issues,” explained Dr. Benjamin. “Plus, you can provide behavioral training so the animal will be patient, not afraid of loud noises, and not aggressive.”

To get her “working papers,” Maddie was evaluated and trained through A New Leash on Life, the McKinney-based chapter of Pet Partners. After a physical and behavioral evaluation, as well as six months of training in obedience, socialization, and manners, Maddie got the green light.

Therapy Animals Work Wonders

Maddie and Jane visit area hospitals, retirement homes, and other facilities where the healing power of animal-human interaction works wonders. “We just help give a little bit of normalcy to the day and help them feel better,” says Jane, explaining how patients’ days are filled with tests, medication, needles, therapies, and exams.

Therapy pets also ease grief, stress, and loneliness, which is why Flora Ellias, Dr. Benjamin’s receptionist, takes her three-year-old Irish Wolfhound Sheldon to visit patients through the Vitas Hospice Paw Pals Program.

“You can easily see the connection that people have with the dogs,” says Flora, who has been taking Sheldon on hospice visits three times a month for the past two years. “Some patients are nonverbal until the dogs visit, and then they start

talking. Rehab patients with mobility issues will pet and brush the dogs. Even Alzheimer’s patients sometimes recall a pet they had from childhood.”

Dr. Benjamin also comments on the therapeutic effects that animals can have on people. “There have been studies done that show the simple process of petting a dog or hearing a cat purr can release endorphins that benefit a person’s state of mind.”

Jane Nolan has Witnessed the Benefits First Hand

“One five-year-old boy in oncology had lost his sight and was feeling nauseous,” recalled Jane on a past visit to Children’s Medical Center in Dallas. “He was petting Maddie, trying to figure out what she looked like. I said, ‘Do you trust me and Maddie?’ He said, ‘Sure.’ And I said, ‘We’re going to play a game. You’re going to touch her and tell me what part you’re touching.’ After he figured out he was touching Maddie’s head, he said it felt like her heart because she’s so soft, and I thought that was so intuitive of him. It made him calm down and be more relaxed. It was a special moment.”



Formerly abused and left on the side of a road, 4-year old Maddie, now spends 4 days a week bringing joy to others alongside her owner, Jane Nolan. “I saw that Maddie had a really good temperament and a very kind heart,” says Jane.



"I enjoy bringing my dog to work every day and being able to bring out a smile," says Jane Nolan, of Maddie, pictured here at Children's Medical Center as part of their 'Paws of Hope' program.

Think being a therapy animal is just for dogs? Think again. A variety of animals have the potential to serve as therapy animals, including cats, pigs, ponies, birds, guinea pigs and rabbits.

Contact these local chapters of Pet Partners for details:

Delta Hearts of Gold,
Aledo, (817) 291-5994

Angel Paws, McGregor,
(254) 744-9926

A New Leash on Life,
McKinney, (972) 740-8722



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