

Therapy Dogs

By Marcia Goldman

Some things are just better with a dog by your side - like long walks, reading a book, or curling up in front of the TV. When I retired a few years ago, I was eager to slow down, and I figured I would know what I was supposed to do next when the time came. It happened during a quiet lunch with a friend over a discussion about meaningfully filling one's time. She shared with me her favorite activity, which was visiting schools and summer camps with her black lab, Jake. Jake is a therapy dog, and it sounded like Jake did all of the work while my friend tagged along. I knew about therapy dogs, but I didn't know if only certain breeds were used or how one became trained and qualified. I asked a few questions, and as my friend talked about the work they did together, I had an epiphany. I love my dog, I spent 30 years as a special education teacher, and if I combined the two, what better way to legitimize spending all day with my dog?

Two questions remained: first, would Lola, a 5 pound Yorkie, qualify to become a therapy dog? And second, what was the process? Apparently, size does matter. There was initial concern that she was too small, and that her small dog temperament, possibly being nervous around strangers, might not be a good fit. I assured everyone that

although Lola was small, she didn't know it. And she loved people - big, small, young, old, she was always happy to meet someone new. She also seemed to intuitively know when someone needed an extra lick or cuddle.

The training to become a therapy dog was not quick or easy. Lola had to go through two levels of obedience school, handle the Canine Good Citizenship test, and then pass the behavior screening. Throughout the process, Lola and I were warned that she might not succeed. But we were both determined, and as we approached the final test, I was confident that I had a star pupil and that she would make it with flying colors. And pass she did.

As it turns out, Lola is in good company. One of the very first therapy dogs was a Yorkshire Terrier! During World War II, under combat operations on the island of New Guinea, Corporal William Wynne found a young adult Yorkshire Terrier abandoned on the battlefield, adopted her, and named her Smoky.

Smoky accompanied Wynne on numerous combat missions and provided comfort and entertainment for the troops, but her service as a therapy dog began when Corporal Wynne was wounded. Wynne's army pals brought Smoky to the hospital for a visit. She not only successfully cheered him up, but was a hit with the other wounded soldiers. The commanding officer, Dr. Charles Mayo, (of the famed Mayo Clinic),

permitted Smoky to sleep with Wynne in his hospital bed and allowed her to go on rounds. Smoky's work as a therapy dog continued for another 12 years.

Research indicates what most pet owners already know: interactions with animals can reduce our stress levels and increase our sense of well-being. Therapy dogs comfort people in hospitals, nursing homes, and schools. By allowing strangers to pet them, they help people with learning difficulties as well as those in stressful situations. Therapy dogs were recently used in Newtown after the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, as well as in Boston after the Marathon bombing.

Lola loves being a therapy dog. As soon as I tell her it's time for work, she is eager to get her scarf on and head to the car. And people love her. I have seen the power of therapy dogs as she cuddles in the lap of someone in a wheelchair, calms an anxious child with autism, or encourages a child, who doesn't talk, to speak aloud for the first time to one small dog. I know that Lola loves what she does, but the real secret is, so do I. She may be the one doing the work, but I am the one that gets to go with her. And my life is richer for it.