

# Fiona



Fiona and I were leaving the hospital after a regular therapy dog visit. We were both a bit tired but stopped when a man asked if we would spend a few minutes with his son, who was waiting for his physical therapy appointment. I was so glad we did.

As we walked towards the “Health Ambitions” area, the father explained that he and his wife were considering getting a small dog for their son but weren’t sure whether this was something that

would make him happy. This puzzled me until we walked around the corner and I saw his son. His son was a young adult in a specialized wheelchair. He was non-verbal and nearly totally paralyzed. He made some sounds when Fiona and I walked to him. Picking up Fiona so that she would be easier to see, I immediately noticed a change in the young man’s actions. Fiona struggled to get closer to him — something I’d never experienced with her. I looked to the parents for guidance, and they asked me to allow Fiona near his ear. Fiona desperately wanted to kiss his ear, so I held her tightly and leaned closer to the wheelchair. The young man became excited and babbled a lot. Again, I looked to the parents. Both parents were smiling with tears streaming down their faces. They told me a few minutes later that their son was telling them how happy he was. They had not seen such a response from him in a long time. His response to

Fiona seemed to please everyone who witnessed the brief visit. Fiona and I received hugs and thanks for the visit from both parents, who said they were overjoyed at his response. Our visit was just a few minutes, but long enough to witness Fiona’s magical ways of communicating with someone in need, which seemed a miracle to the parents. Being part of a therapy dog team makes my heart sing. I am privileged to be a part of these moments.

—Eileen Wittfelt, Longmont, CO

## Therapy Dogs Help Those Who Are Grieving

Chex, a Newfoundland owned by Hazel Jacoby, and Maddie, a black Labrador owned by Pat Wheeler, had been visiting a nursing home in Castro Valley, California, for several months. The activities director was so impressed with what Chex and Maddie, as well as Bijou, a Miniature Poodle, could do for their patients that she told an administrator at Castro Valley Adult Career Education (CVACE) about them.

At the same time, a student in the grief support group at CVACE mentioned to the teacher that it would be nice if the animals came there. What a great idea! The administrator at CVACE called Hazel, and Chex and Maddie started visiting the grief support group in February 2014. During the day, Monday through Friday, CVACE offers many classes for adults with developmental disabilities. This is a class for those who are grieving the death of a loved one. Chex and Maddie go twice a month to provide support to those in this group.

The group sits in a circle — each student having a chance to share something about his or her loved one. They also write in journals, draw pictures and make scrapbooks about those that have died. Chex and Maddie lie down in the middle of the circle, at least to start with, and then move

### How well do you know your Therapy Dogs Inc. Guidelines?

4. Dogs may be off leash when performing tricks.

True  False

Answers can be found on page 45



around to be with those who need their loving and attention. Teacher Kath McCormark says, “I can’t imagine having group without Chex or Maddie in attendance. These dogs make our group a safe, comforting space for the students. They are there for our students when they are sad or sharing something at a very deep level. Chex and Maddie have really transformed the feel of the group.”

One day, Pat mentioned in the group that Maddie, too, was grieving because her two other dogs had died: Lawrence just before Christmas and Albert two weeks later. Albert apparently missed Lawrence so much that he stopped eating when Lawrence died. Pat told the students how Albert had been lying next to Lawrence the last few moments before Lawrence went to Doggie Heaven, resting his paw on Lawrence. Pat pointed out that animals grieve, too. Sassy and Sugar, two dogs in Hazel and Chex’s home had also died recently. Suddenly the students started talking about their pets who had died. They clipped pictures from magazines that looked like pets they once had. They gave Chex and Maddie gentle hugs as a way of comforting them. One student in the class wrote for the CVACE AWD Voices (AWD stands for Adults With Disabilities), a newspaper produced by CVACE students, “Maddie and her handler Patricia came to our grief class. She talked to us, and Maddie made us happy because some students cry in that group. We write in our journals. We talk about family and friends who have died. . . . After break, Chex and his handler come in. It is good to be with the dogs.”

Chex and Maddie usually wait outside in the courtyard for mid-morning break. That way, all students at CVACE have an opportunity to see Chex and Maddie. Staff asked if Hazel and Pat would conduct an assembly for the entire school, so, one morning, about 90 students met in the multi-purpose room, sitting in a large U-formation around the room. Pat and Hazel invited Janet Soderstrom and Bijou to join them that day. There were three different sized dogs and three breeds. Hazel talked about what therapy dogs are, what they do and how they differ from service dogs and guide dogs. Hazel, Pat and Jan told the students about their dogs and what each breed of dog was bred to do. Students were surprised to hear how a dog like Chex could pull a raft of people in the ocean to safety, or how a Lab like Maddie could pick up ducks and gently return them to the hunter and get fish that fell out of the fisherman’s nets, or how the poodle was originally a hunting dog, trimmed the way it is to keep parts of its body warm while hunting. The students were also very surprised to learn that all dogs are descended from wolves. Each of the three dogs moved around the room to visit all the students individually and to give them bookmarks with a photo of the dog on it and saying, “Chex (or Bijou or Maddie) thinks you are special.” The students were excited to get a different color bookmark from each dog. Teachers commented on how well behaved all the students were during the assembly. Chex, Maddie, and Bijou certainly have an impact on these special students, loving all of them and helping them cope with the death of loved ones.

—Patricia Wheeler, Livermore, CA

