

By Dale Sprouse

# Dogs Help Lift the Spirits of Veterans

It was a bright and crisp fall morning, a few short weeks away from Thanksgiving, as a group of vets gathered at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) nursing care facility in Livermore to offer their thanks. Most of the vets were struggling with assorted ailments—the effects of stroke, diabetes, and heart disease. Some were confined to wheelchairs; others were getting around with canes or on the arms of others.

But the vets' spirits were high as they came to honor their guests, who had befriended them, offering what one vet described as "unconditional caring." The guests were obviously happy to be there too: you could tell as they approached their hosts, tails wagging to and fro.

The occasion was a ceremony to present "service awards" to the vets' guests—five canine volunteers in the local VA nursing center's "animal-assisted activities/therapy" program. Under the program conducted in partnership with the Valley Humane Society, at least one canine, along with its owner, tries to visit the veterans' facility daily, offering welcome companionship, providing distraction from pain, and assisting whenever possible with physical therapy activities.



Pictured are (above) Doug Cabral with Jiffy, Pat Wheeler and Lawrence the Livermore Lab, and Lisa Clowdus with Dazzle. (left photo) Gary Wichet with Lawrence and Jiffy. (Lower right), Dazzle and Yayman Todd.



The vets just love it when the dogs make their appearance. They jockey their wheelchairs to get close to stroke the animals' fur. All the while, the vets beam from ear to ear at the attention of their four-legged companions.

"I like the way the dogs come to you when you call them," says Army veteran Carl Zepeda, who spent 10 months at the VA's Palo Alto facility before being transferred to Livermore about eight months ago.

Recreation Therapist Kathy Kelley says the dogs are important to the vets, some of whom do not receive visits from family or friends. When a vet reaches out to make contact with a dog, he receives an "instant response," says Kelley. It is a response that delivers the emotional message, "someone in this world is paying attention to me," she says.

The dogs provide bed-bound vets tactile stimulation and others with encouragement to try new things in therapy—to reach farther than they think they can when undergoing physical therapy, to try to walk greater distances.

The dogs are also important to people who have been institutionalized and who no longer have a sense that they are in control of their life, said Kelley.

She explained, "When you get institutionalized, you don't even have control over when you go to the bathroom; it has to be scheduled sometimes. You need to be able to take control of something. With the dogs they can decide whether they want to see them or pet them. Those decisions really are important."

VA ward nurse Barbara Militano calls the canine visits "a gift to our patients." The dogs, she says, provide "an enhanced level of pain relief by either decreasing patients' need for pain medication or offering better management of their pain from the medication they do receive."

VA volunteer Pat Wheeler, whose dogs "Lawrence, the Livermore Lab" and "Albert" are favorites of the veterans, says the animals can help defuse situations that might require police intervention.

"There was one patient who had a cane and didn't want to give it up," Wheeler recalls. "I said, 'Albert will hold your cane for you. Give the cane to Albert.' He put the cane on the ground and Albert kind of looked at me. I told the patient, 'Albert asked if I could hold the cane for him,' and he said, 'OK.'"

Police Officer Ron Leisure, who patrols the VA facility's corridors and grounds, says the pet program is "good therapy for the patient." Having the animals at the nursing center provides a home-like environment that creates calmness and helps the vets relax.

(continued on page 11)



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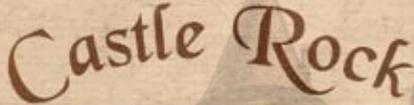
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"People forget about their illness. They feel a part of something," he says. "The patient, the dog and the handler seem to be a good match."

"This is the best thing the VA has done, letting these dogs come in," says Gary Wickett, a Navy and Merchant Marine veteran, who has been in the VA hospital since February and has undergone four amputations. "Their (the dogs') caring is unconditional. When you are in physical therapy, it is hard sometimes. They will come over and sit beside you or lay beside you when you are doing your work. They don't make the pain go away, but they take your mind off it."

Eleven Valley Humane Society therapy dogs are in the Livermore VA program coordinated by Wheeler. She has been a Valley Humane Society volunteer for about two decades.

Wheeler became interested in therapy dogs after viewing an Animal Planet show about the therapeutic value of pets. She asked a Peninsula breeder to help her find a suitable animal, one that had the right demeanor to work in a hospital setting and wouldn't flinch at the approach of wheel chairs, outstretched hands and constant stroking. The vet recommended a Black Labrador Retriever, which Wheeler's son named Lawrence, the Livermore Lab.

After undergoing a training program, Lawrence started "volunteering" at the VA's nursing facility in Livermore in July 2004. On October 28, Navy veteran Michael Brown, a patient at the Livermore VA nursing home, presented Lawrence, whom he has bestowed the honorary rank of "Chief Petting Officer," with a 300-hour service award pin. On the same day, Albert, Wheeler's Black Labrador/Border Collie Mix, received a 100-hour award pin for his service to the veterans.

Three other 50-hour service pins were awarded at the ceremony. They went to...

- Dazzle, owned by Lisa Clowdus of Livermore. The 11-year old Vizsla, a Hungarian hunting breed, has been a VA volunteer since April 2005.

- Jiffy, owned by Doug Cabral of Tracy. This 7-year-old Yellow Labrador Retriever has been volunteering with the vets since May 2006.

- Patch, owned by Salomè Rodrigues-Thorson. This 7-year-old Golden Retriever has been volunteering at the VA since January 2005.

Dazzle and Jiffy became VA volunteer dogs after their owners met Wheeler. Clowdus, who rescues homeless Vizslas' overheard Wheeler talking about the canine program during a Livermore meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She thought the program would be ideal for Dazzle, who had performed as a "service dog" for a paraplegic

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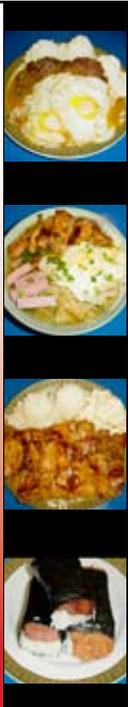

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woman in Florida before Clowdus rescued her after the dog's owner died.

"Pat invited us to come up (to the Veteran's facility). We watched what she and Lawrence did," recalls Clowdus. "The program seemed such a natural for Dazzle."

Cabral was at the VA facility for an appointment when he encountered Wheeler and Lawrence. "We got to talking about the program, and Jiffy and I have been taking part in the program ever since," says Cabral. He describes Jiffy as a very mellow yellow Lab that didn't make it all the way through the Guide Dog for the Blind program, but does quite well working with the veterans. He and Jiffy usually spend about three hours a week with the vets.

Rodrigues-Thorson volunteered Patch to the program after reading a post 9/11 article in Parade magazine about pet therapy. "I wasn't working at the time—I had been down-sized—and I remember telling my husband, 'Patch and I can do that,'" she said.

She said she tried searching on-line for information about pet therapy, but found the citations so broad that she asked her vet for help. He recommended that she join the Valley Humane Society (see sidebar). "I called them up and started volunteering."

Patch initially started volunteering at local nursing homes through the Valley Humane Society's pet therapy program before gaining entrance into the more restrictive VA program.

Now that she is working again, Rodrigues-Thorson says she can only take Patch to the VA once a month. They usually stay about three hours per visit.

"They love the pets," she says of the vets. "When Patch walks into a room their eyes light up." She says she and many of the vets, some of whom suffer from Alzheimers, "have conversations about the kind of dog they had growing up." She states, "They may not remember what they had for dinner. But they remember what kind of dog they had or the name of the dog."

"I get so much out of it the experience with the vets and so does Patch," she adds. "He is chomping at the bit as we get ready to drive here. He just loves this place."

Wheeler says her dogs have the same reaction as soon as she takes the Valley Humane Society pet therapy vest out the drawer where it is kept at home and gets Lawrence or Albert ready for their visit to the VA nursing home.

Sometimes when en route to the VA facility, Wheeler says she has to turn around because she realizes she has forgotten to first pay a bill or stop at the post office. This upsets the dogs. "They know the way out here," she says. "They love the attention they get from the vets."



Josephine Moffat has a moment with Jiffy.

## Valley Humane Society Uses Dogs in Other Programs

Although 11 dogs participate in the Livermore VA Animal Assisted Therapy/Activities program, more than 70 Valley Humane Society-certified dogs are involved in local pet therapy activities.

According to Society Executive Director David Steigman, dogs have to go through an intensive training program to assist in nursing homes, assisted-living facilities, senior programs and other programs such as the Pleasanton Library's Paws to Read.

Paws to Read is a literacy program for youngsters 5-12. The youngsters overcome their fear and uncertainty of the written word by reading animal stories to dogs. "It is a great program," says Steigman.

Volunteers in the "Pet Therapy program" must join the Valley Humane Society and attend a new volunteer orientation. Orientation sessions are held once a month.

Volunteers must submit a "certification of health" form that contains volunteer, animal and veterinarian information, such as physical examination and vaccination details.

The Valley Humane Society cautions that not all dogs are suitable for pet therapy activities. Prospective therapy dog are evaluated before they are admitted to the program. The screening is handled by Christine McDaniel, who coordinates the pet therapy program.

"I don't know what percentage of the dogs that apply get in, but the program is very heavily screened up front," says Steigman.

Volunteer applications for Valley Humane Society can be obtained by calling (925) 426-8656.

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