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Canine Link's dog-human teams comfort people who need it

By Scott Stafford, Berkshire Eagle Staff (mailto:ssafford@berkshireeagle.com?)
 subject=Berkshire Eagle Online:)

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 Mandy Pieczarka hands Gabby the little brown dog to teacher Susan Fireman of Canine Link (who is just posing as a patient in a wheelchair) as part of training as a therapy dog. (Ben Garver/Berkshire Eagle)

GREAT BARRINGTON -- Tomboy lives with llamas. But once a week, he spends an hour helping in peer-counseling sessions at Monument Valley Middle School.

Tomboy is a big, white, fluffy, 6-year-old Great Pyrenees canine. He and his human, Liz Marino, are volunteers with Canine Link, a nonprofit that started six months ago that pairs volunteer canine-human teams with people in need of a little canine care.

About 20 active teams are regularly dispatched to hospitals, hospice facilities, schools, nursing homes and homes for the disabled to give people a different perspective and a level of cuddly comfort they may not get otherwise.

And there is a growing need for such work.



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Rosie the golden-doodle, owned by Rae Schwarz, waits between lessons for being a therapy dog by Canine Link. (Ben Garver/ Berkshire Eagle)

According to Susan Fireman, executive director of Canine Link, the agency is seeking more volunteer teams to become certified and active.

"We're really growing in the Berkshires and I could use more teams to go into the schools," Fireman said.

For some students or patients, it means a pleasant afternoon with a friendly dog. But for the more acute cases -- such as someone with multiple profound physical, emotional or mental disabilities -- after a lengthy program of hour-long sessions, it can lead to progress both emotionally

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and physically.

For those enduring the hospice process, it can be a shiny moment in a dark time. Or for those grieving the loss of a family member, it can be another level of comfort in a time of deep anxiety.

For the teams, it is about helping people through their bond with each other.

"The goal for the volunteers is to make the world a better place through the love of their dogs," Fireman said.

Each team goes through six to 12 weeks of training to become certified and insured. Then, they get their assignments. Each team is matched with clients they are best-suited to help depending on their personalities and their skill sets.

Professionals are finding that many people seem more willing to open up when they have a loving dog with them.

Dominick Sacco, a professional psychologist and a school adjustment counselor at Monument Valley Middle School, said he's only been taking advantage of employing the canine therapy for the last year, but wishes he had been using it for 30 years.

"The impact is amazing," Sacco said. "The dog becomes part of the community and softens the climate. It makes people more comfortable, lets them feel more open and safe."

"Sometimes it's just easier when the child is hugging a cuddly dog," Fireman said. "For Alzheimer's patients, it can produce a level of participation or delight they might not feel otherwise."

Each session is limited to one hour because of the stress on the dogs.

Fireman noted that all the stress or anxiety released by the patient is absorbed by the dog to a certain degree, and many of them are fatigued by the experience.

"The dogs are spending time with someone they're not used to -- someone who may be experiencing intense unhappiness or confusion," she said. "The dogs can absorb that."

Liz Marino, co-owner of the Ivory Pond Farm llama ranch in South Egremont, volunteers with all three of her dogs, including Tomboy.

"The clinician can use the dog to get through to the patient, as a bridge of comfort in counseling sessions," Marino said. "And the dogs naturally want to give that way for their pack, for their humans."

And her dogs just love it, she added.

"Tomboy gets petted, he gets hugged," Marino said. "When we go into schools, he gets mobbed by children and he loves every minute of it."

Canine Link operates in Hudson Valley and Manhattan in New York, Litchfield County in Connecticut, and in the Berkshires.

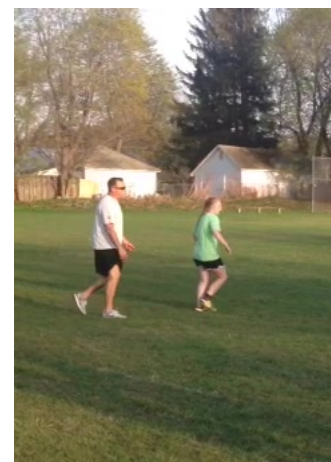
Anyone interested in volunteering can visit www.cltherapydogs.org (<http://www.cltherapydogs.org>) or call (855) 595-4651.

To reach Scott Stafford:
sstafford@berkshireeagle.com (<mailto:sstafford@berkshireeagle.com>),
or (413) 496-6241.
On Twitter: @BE_SStafford



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Buzz the golden retriever and owner Mary Fordyce share a moment of bonding as part of training for therapy dogs by canine link. (Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle)

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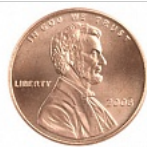
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