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[Volume 4 Issue 46 \(/category/tmi-edition/volume-4-issue-46\)](#)

[NEWS \(/CATEGORY/TMI-SECTION/NEWS\)](#)

Tags

[Canine Link \(/category/topic/canine-link\)](#)

[Therapy Dogs \(/category/topic/therapy-dogs\)](#)

## Therapy dogs make a difference



*The first Canine Link class to graduate in Millbrook. From left to right Barbara Bagnold & Joey, Stuart Armstrong & Cooper, Cindie Kish & Willa, Michael Poulin & China with Susan Fireman*

*by [Carola Lott \(/category/tmi-author/carola-lott\)](#)*

A visit from a dog can work wonders when you are ill. As Terry Regan, one of the founders of Canine Link, said “I’ve been doing dog therapy work for about 10 years and it wasn’t until I had a visit from a dog when I was in the hospital this April that I realized just how powerful the work is.”

Canine Link was founded in Millbrook this summer by Regan along with Catherine Kennan, Susan Fireman and Mark Condon who had all been involved with dog therapy work and wanted to do something locally. On Saturday six dogs and their owners were the first Millbrook class to graduate.

Susan Fireman, executive director of Canine Link who has been training dogs for 20 years, teaches classes here in Millbrook at Dr. Paul Schwartz’s clinic. She also gives classes at the community center in Great Barrington. Fireman has had many years of experience working with therapy dogs including hospice work with Therapy Dogs International.

All breeds from Great Pyrenees to tiny Chihuahuas are welcome as are dogs of no particular parentage. Fireman will first evaluate an animal to make sure they are not aggressive and have the right temperament for therapy work.



Dutchess who belongs to Canine Link president, Mark Condon, is blind but nonetheless a brilliant therapy dog

A dog that has been accepted will first attend six weeks of beginner classes to learn basic obedience and how to behave around crutches, wheelchairs, walkers and other things they will encounter in their work. Next they will have six weeks of advanced training to teach them how to deal with such disabilities as autism, and Alzheimer's. Owners too will learn what to say to a patient before entering their room, and how to make sure their dog is safe at all times. Teams are expected to practice at home. In order to graduate dogs must be safe and completely under control. They must be able to stay and lie down on command, and walk nicely on a leash.

Once a dog and his handler have graduated Fireman will assign them to a facility that is appropriate for both dog and their handler. The goal is to have the right facility for the right team. Classes are \$250 for each six week session. For the final six classes of advanced work 20% of the teams are on scholarship.

Teams are expected to volunteer a minimum of twice a month although some people who can only work once a month. Facilities have different hours so there is a choice of evenings, weekends as well as during weekdays. Teams cannot work for more than one hour at a time, because dogs absorb stress and become exhausted.

Hospitals are not the only places that welcome therapy dogs. Children who need help with reading benefit enormously from the presence of a therapy dog. It seems when a child reads to a nonjudgmental presence like a dog their word count rises from 110 words per minute to 140 words per minute. Three teams visit Alden Place Elementary every Thursday.

Dogs enter the school library with their handler. The child sits on a bean bag with the dog and reads to the student for 20 minutes from a book the teacher has chosen. The teacher may also tell the handler tips how much support and help to give the child.

Michael Poulin and China, who is so small she would fit into a china dish, are recent graduates.

Poulin says at first “I was apprehensive but now feel confident we can do the job and bring joy into patients lives.”

At the moment teams from Canine Link are working at Northern Dutchess Hospital in Rhinebeck and Columbia Memorial Hospital in Hudson. They are currently making arrangements with the Fountains in Millbrook. Teams are also visiting Cardinal Hayes.

The name Canine Link was chosen because the dogs link people with each other. Fireman says, “there is no better way of volunteering. It’s a very easy way to give of yourself because you are giving through your dog. It is a way of connecting with people, and with a dog words are not necessary. Giving of yourself through an animal is one of the best things I’ve ever done. I consider it a gift to be able to help people, but I could never do it without a dog with me.”