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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Therapists Are Leashed, but Affection Is Unbridled



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Ruth Martin, 86, meets Dolly, a poodle with silly garb but eight weeks of training as a pet therapist, at the Clove Lakes Health Care and Rehabilitation Center, a nursing home on Staten Island.

By [ALEXIS REHRMANN](#)

With a jingle of tags and bells, Harley, Dolly, Feather and Bailey trot past a bank of poinsettias and into the Clove Lakes Health Care and Rehabilitation Center, a nursing home on Staten Island. The lobby erupts, as if rock stars just walked in.

“He sure is No. 1!” someone says, reacting to the basketball jersey worn by Harley, a black standard poodle and the largest of the group. Dolly is a white toy poodle, while the other two are Tibetan spaniels.

Exclamations ring out — “Oh, my God!” “So cute!” “Oh, they’re beautiful!” — amid a chorus of hellos.

On this recent visit, the dogs all wore holiday outfits: festive shirts, bells on collars, barrettes and headbands in their fur.

“Look, her little doggy poncho!” a woman exclaimed.

In their corner of the world, these four dogs are famous. At least once a week, they and their owners, Eugene and Georgette Edkins, make therapeutic visits to hospitals, hospice patients and nursing homes throughout Staten Island.

The dogs completed eight weeks of training to become certified pet therapists through the Bright and Beautiful Therapy Dog Inc., a nonprofit based in Morris Plains, N.J. They learned to be calm around wheelchairs, walkers and agitated patients, and were trained to ignore treats that fall on the floor. (Patients might accidentally drop pills, putting the dogs at risk if they ate them, Mr. Edkins explained.)

For every therapy visit, there is one handler per dog. "You've got to keep an eye on everything," Mr. Edkins said. "Especially if you are in a hallway, there's always beds going through, food going through, medicine going through."

In an hour, the dogs may see about a dozen people individually, plus 10 to 20 in group spaces, like this lobby. The Edkinses usually leave one pair of dogs in the car while the other dogs work.

"Everybody goes home tired as anything," Ms. Edkins said. "There's so much to see. There are so many distractions. You're going to different rooms, different reception areas. It's better than taking them for a three-mile walk because there are so many different people."

Ms. Edkins has two closets at home dedicated to dog outfits and other accessories. "The patients enjoy the costumes. That's why they are dressed. It's obviously not for the dogs," she said.

The Edkinses started training their dogs for pet therapy about three years ago, as Mr. Edkins, now 59, was approaching retirement. He worked for the New York Fire Department for about 33 years. Ms. Edkins, 53, is retired from work on trade publications in Manhattan.

In March 2004 Mr. Edkins joined the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program of the Community Service Society of New York, one of seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#). Every year, 9,000 members of the retired and senior program contribute more than two million volunteer hours to more than 600 organizations in the five boroughs. Members are 55 and older.

The program reimburses some travel expenses for volunteers. This year, about \$150 from The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund was used to reimburse Mr. Edkins for gas.

The dogs bring a bright spot into days often marred by pain, age and illness.

On this visit Ms. Edkins knelt by Teresa Filomeno's wheelchair and reintroduced her dogs. "You know Feather and Bailey," she said, "and you know Harley and Dolly."

They have been visiting Ms. Filomeno in the nursing home for about a year. Feather sits calmly while Ms. Filomeno holds the small spaniel and remembers her own dogs.

“I had nine Labradors,” she said. “They never leave you.”

In addition to connecting with the dogs, patients share with the Edkinses. “You talk about the dogs that they had in their lives; it just creates conversation,” Mr. Edkins said.

“It’s very satisfying,” Ms. Edkins said. “Some patients smile and say, ‘You made my day,’ and we get that all the time: ‘You made my day.’”