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The Soothing Impact of a Pet

By Bobbie Dodson



George Waterman, a canine companion of a Hospice volunteer Photo provided

"They recognize me as the lady who brings George to visit. He is the important one," says Orinda resident Marie Waterman. She is one of the Hospice volunteers who take their dogs to visit Hospice patients. It is just one of the many services this organization offers.

Both the dog and the owner attend training classes. The dog must receive a Canine Good Citizen Certification from the American Kennel Club. The well-known local organization, ARF, provides this training in which the dog must perform accurately such tasks as good interaction with other dogs; navigating an obstacle course; obey the "stay" command while the owner walks away and not moving until the owner tells them to; and giving the dog to a stranger while the owner walks out of the room and the dog obediently stays. The dogs are also scored on how they react to people with walkers, crutches, or to a patient whose oxygen machine makes a strange sound. "George didn't pass the first time," Waterman admits, "but came through with flying colors the next time. Mainly the dog must have a good temperament. George loves attention and is friendly with anyone who pays attention to him.

"I was a hospice volunteer making calls on patients who requested it. Engaging them in

conversation I sometimes would ask if they had a pet, what was it, its name, and so on. I saw how they often perked up when talking about their pet and thought bringing my pet would really add to my visit," she says. "I guessed George would be a good candidate. He's a terrier mix, just a mutt with a loving disposition."

Waterman stresses it is the dog's personality not its pedigree that's important. George was picked up as a stray on the streets of Concord and taken to the Martinez Contra Costa Animal Services where she picked him out to take home. A veterinarian thinks he's about 7 years old.

Dogs in the program wear the Pet Hug Pack Visiting Animal vest from ARF because that's where they trained, but they belong to the Hospice program and that is the place from which all assignments come. After being told about the program, if patients say they would like to participate, they are given the choice of a large or small dog, perhaps the breed, and then available volunteers with a dog to match the choice are called to check availability.

"We completely respect their privacy," Waterman explains. "We are sent records so we know about their illness, but everything is confidential."

She says it is so rewarding to see the way most patients react to George's visit. "I ask them if they'd like to pet him, have him on their bed, take him for a walk. Mostly they just want him close so they can hug him. It may be the patient is 'partially aware' when we arrive but they can become animated, full of life after some time with George.

"I've made up baseball-like cards with George's picture on them. They so enjoy having them on the wall next to their bed. When I come they may stare blankly when I introduce myself, but then George jumps on their bed to be petted and they are a different person. Family members are

delighted you've come and ask 'When are you coming back?' I typically visit once a week.

"People ask me, 'Doesn't it make you sad when a patient you've been seeing dies?' Yes, but mainly I have to remember George and I made their last days happier," Waterman says.

The goal of the program, which began in 2002 when ARF initiated it, is to provide comfort and something that will make their clientele happy. There is also a Hospice Bereavement program, The Bridge, for children, parents, and caregivers - anyone who has lost a loved one. Waterman comes to this program where George is just there to interact with the participants. She also acts as a mentor to help new volunteers.

It's been four years since Waterman joined this Hospice program and she finds fulfillment in what she is doing. She modestly explains, "George is the one who does all the work. I'm just the driver."

For information about the Pet Hug Pack program, visit <http://www.arf.net/people-programs/pet-hug-pack/>. To become a Hospice of the East Bay Patient and Family Volunteer call (925) 887-5678, email volunteers@hospiceeastbay.org or visit www.hospiceeastbay.org.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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