

SENIOR SCAPE: Therapy Dogs

By Doug LeGallais

Therapy Dogs are specially trained to bring comfort and affection to people with physical or mental disabilities, often in an institutional setting.

Unlike Service Dogs specifically trained to the needs of one person, like a Seeing Eye Dog, Therapy Dogs are a friendly visitor in many people's lives.

In 1984 my wife, Linda, was asked to attend a meeting of the St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dog program, to learn about the mission of the program and what duties and responsibilities volunteers could expect.

She was hooked immediately and started preparing our five year old Chesapeake Bay Retriever, Stormy, for the Canine Good Citizen test she would have to pass. This required the dog to demonstrate basic obedience commands as well as display a calm demeanour when subjected to loud noises, strangers approaching and various other stimuli.

Happily she passed and they, Linda and Stormy, were assigned to a weekly visit at a local nursing home in Aurora. It was a truly rewarding experience. The residents' response was varied, related to their physical ability and mental health.

For many it was just the pleasure of stroking a friendly dog. The tactile experience of stroking a dog has been proven to be very therapeutic. Others were reminded of past pets and many heart warming stories were shared.

Some believed Stormy was their own long since departed pet and were greatly cheered to be with them again. Linda was never tempted to correct them. The "team" continued their visits until such time as we determined that, as Storm aged, she was sadly no longer up to the task.

When Stormy passed, we adopted another Chessie pup named Sounder. From the beginning she was a very calm pup so my wife decided to train her and see if she would be allowed to skip the "one year old" clause. Because of our experience with dogs, the St. John's people agreed to test her early, once all vaccinations had been given. She was tested at five months and passed.

Although her response to commands wasn't perfect, her lovely disposition and their trust in my wife's handling abilities allowed her a special dispensation. They began immediately at the same Home.

This time around was great fun as the residents were able to enjoy her puppyhood. Many were very engaged in "helping" as they gave commands and watched what new skills she had learned this week.

Sounder had a special knack with residents suffering from memory impairment. She was infinitely patient with their sometimes awkward movements and abrupt verbalizing and would quietly lay her head on their laps. There was a special communication happening there that those observing were not privy to.

Eventually we were on to our third Chessie, Surfer. Linda was soon taking her to Sunrise Assisted Living to visit her Aunt Ethel, who was a resident there. Soon the staff was asking her to visit other residents and a weekly scheduled visit began.

Surfer too has sadly passed and we are now raising a new pup, Splash, a Standard Poodle. Hopefully one day, with training and patience she too will have the skills be a Therapy Dog.

As Linda told me, "I have been privileged to witness the spiritually uplifting experience of the simple gesture of a gentle head in a person's lap and two soft warm eyes looking into theirs. I've been the biggest winner."

As a point of interest, in July the Aurora Seniors' Association began a program of monthly visits from St. John's Ambulance Therapy Dogs at the Centre. It has been met with great enthusiasm.

HAPPENINGS AT THE SENIORS' CENTRE

COMPUTER CLUB. The computer club meets every Tuesday morning for one hour from 10 am to 11 am. On the third Tuesday they always have an Apple presentation. In January the topic is the iCloud. Computer classes are also being held starting January 11 for Windows PC classes and on January 31 the Mac classes.

TED TALKS. These are held every month. In January they will be held on Tuesday, January 16 and the topics are: "Why you should define your fears instead of your goals;" "The biology of our best and worst selves;" "Power Foods for the Brain;" and "The Walkable City."

LEARN TO PLAY HAND & FOOT CANASTA. If you would like to learn, come out on Wednesday, January 31 from 2 pm to 4

pm and learn. Sign up at Reception first.