

Spreading smiles with four-legged friends is way of life for Caring Canadian



By Brock Weir

A smile can go a long way in showing someone just how much you care.

But not all smiles are created equal.

Take, for instance, the case of Aurora's Vivian Hould. Ms. Hould, an active community volunteer, makes the rounds of area nursing homes, with a dog or two in tow, on a regular basis. She recalls a visit to one facility in Newmarket where she and her Papillon sat down with one elderly gentleman who simply started to pet the dog. That was simple enough, but then he started talking to the dog. While that might seem simple enough, it was something of a watershed moment. This gentleman hadn't spoken in years.

"We don't even know the difference we are making because so often we will go into somebody's room and visit, not knowing they haven't spoken in years," says Ms. Hould.

Others in the community, however, are well aware of the difference Ms. Hould has made in the lives of others throughout the Greater Toronto Area, as coordinator of the St. John's Ambulance's therapy dog program. Having retired from her post in August, Ms. Hould is now set to receive the Caring Canadian Award from Governor General David Johnston, after being nominated by some of her 140-strong team of volunteers and their dogs she fostered for 19 years.

"I was shocked, surprised, and pleased," says Ms. Hould of the honour, which is expected to be awarded in the New Year. "I really didn't expect it. I have worked so, so hard over the past 19 years, but I just feel it is more than I really deserve!"

Ms. Hould, a retiree from Bell Canada, has always had a giving instinct. As a high school student growing up in Montreal, she volunteered her time as a candy striper in a local hospital. But when her time at Bell came to an end, she was not content to sit idle.

Before St. John's Ambulance developed their program, Ms. Hould had her long-haired dachshund evaluated for the program. Soon after the dog passed with flying colours, she went blind, scuttling temporarily their hopes she would be able to make a difference as a therapy dog. Later, a veterinarian suggested she try the dog again in the St. John's Program, and the seeds for two decades of service were sewn.

"She could sense the doors would be open," says Ms. Hould of her blind companion. "Here was an example of a dog that was blind and could still be a therapy dog. We have blind dogs in the program, deaf dogs and there are no limitations."

From her humble beginnings as a volunteer, Ms. Hould eventually became coordinator for Aurora and Newmarket. This responsibility eventually expanded to include just about every area from Steeles Avenue in the south to Lake Simcoe in the north, and from Highway 404 in the east to Highway 27 in the west.

Responsibilities as the program's coordinator include monitoring volunteers, evaluating new teams of owner and dog, and teaching them what to do and how to visit. Many volunteers at first blush, she says, have never set foot in a nursing home, or might never have experienced working with seniors. Dogs might pass the initial tests, but making sure they are ready for any eventuality they might encounter in a nursing home ? from loud noises to odours ? is also given due consideration.

Ideal dogs are friendly, like people and like to be patted, and show no signs of aggression.

?We are just looking for a good, solid dog,? she explains.

Each dog's human is also given the once-or-twice-over to make sure they are able to make the firm commitment that is required of the program. It is essential to be willing to visit the same place every week at the same time, as routine helps build the bonds of the program.

Through her work with the Therapy Dog Program, work expanded beyond nursing homes and hospitals. In addition to her Paws For Stories program in local libraries, she joined forces with the Town of Aurora and the OSPCA to develop the Play It Safe with Dogs program, which visits local schools throughout York Region teaching kids dog bite prevention techniques.

Since its formation in 2000, Ms. Hould estimates the program has been presented to over 25,000 children.

?In Aurora there are so many children who will come up to you and ask, 'may I pet your dog,' and it is obvious they have either had the program or their siblings have taught their younger siblings the right way to meet a dog,? she says. ?When I am with [the therapy program] it is all about the smiles. In nursing homes, people's heads are often down because they are so depressed, but when you go in and you see you bring a smile to their face it just makes your heart feel good. Maybe it's selfish, but it really makes you feel good.

?One German Sheppard visiting Southlake would go into the ICU to visit this lady in a coma. They would disconnect one hand [from IV] and hold her hand to pat the dog. One day, the therapy dog team came into the lobby, and a woman said to them, 'You probably won't recognize me, but I was in ICU and I was so happy when you would come in and you really made me feel better.' This woman was in a coma, and she remembered. It is stuff like that where you might think you're not making a difference, but you are. The dog is making a difference and it is just unbelievable.?