

'I Can't Wait to See Them' Dogs Bring Joy to the Hospice

July 14, 2006, Winchester Star

Winchester - A somber silence hangs in the air on the fourth floor of the building at 333 W. Cork St. But the silence in Blue Ridge Hospice is often broken by the sounds of laughter caused by a four-legged therapist.



Maya, a 2-year-old golden retriever, visits with the patients once a week, bringing joy to each room she enters.

Lori Caslin, Maya's handler, takes the dog to the hospice for the paws4people foundation. The foundation's goal is to enhance human lives with canine love.

Caslin is the executive director for therapy dog operations, which provides certified educational assistance canines for special education and regular classrooms, private placement therapy and service dogs for the seriously ill and spouseless seniors, golden retriever certified therapy dogs that visit nursing homes, hospitals, and hospice, private animal-assisted therapy, and golden retriever rescue and placement.

The beginning idea for paws4people came from Kyria Henry, who was 12 years old at the time.

Now a graduate of Loudoun Valley High School, Kyria is a student at West Virginia University, majoring in business administration with hopes of making paws4people a national organization.

Kyria's father, Terry L. Henry, serves as the executive director of the organization, which is based in Round Hill.

On a recent morning, Caslin and Maya were joined at Blue Ridge Hospice by Caslin's daughter Heather, Terry Henry, and Casey, a 6-month-old golden retriever being trained as a therapy dog.

But as Kelly Bucher, director of volunteer services, pointed out, the dogs don't just provide comfort and distraction from the everyday routine for the patients.

"They're not just here for the residents, but the staff as well," she said. "Because of the nature of the work, they're very calming and relaxing." Lori Caslin was a nurse working in pediatric oncology when she first saw the effect dogs could have on patients. That exposure to canine therapy led her to share dogs with people in similar situations.

During her visit, Lori, Heather, Maya, and Casey stopped into the room of Bill O'Leary, one of the dogs' biggest fans. When his canine pals entered the room, O'Leary's face lit up with excitement. Both dogs quickly made their way onto his bed, where they were treated with Froot Loops cereal and peanut butter - snacks O'Leary

keeps in his room especially for the dogs. He also has a photo of Luna, another therapy dog, at the beach.

Casey, who leapt off the bed to check out the other people and goings-on in the room, was encouraged back onto the bed by O'Leary, who said, "Come on up here, sweetheart."

When she finally jumped back on the bed, she lay on her back to allow him to rub her belly.

Toward the end of their visit, O'Leary requested a few minutes alone with the dogs.

"I have to have my personal time with them," he said.

In a world that doesn't offer much to look forward to, O'Leary said he looks forward to his visits with the dogs. "I can't wait to see them," he said.

Terry Henry said the reward from being involved in canine therapy is twofold.

First, there is a sense of pride from seeing your dog helping somebody.

And bringing joy into the lives of others, he said, provides an "extra kick."

-Angela Jones