

Being part of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program gives Diva and me a new *leash* on life.

CARING CANINES

Therapy Dogs and Well-Being

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In my professional life as a senior executive in the Health and Productivity field and now in the role of consultant, I am aware that our health care system is stretched beyond capacity in responding to the complexities of an aging population. Families and society are struggling with multiple demands, with knowing what resources are available to assist them and with how to navigate the intricacies of the system.

In my personal life, I know well the challenges of long-distance caregiving, having supported my father and mother through my mother's cancer. I recall the exhaustion of numerous trips "home," frequent medical appointments, hospital admissions and the eventual palliative care visits. My personal journey interacting with our burdened health care system was challenging. But, at the end of my mother's life, one of the brilliant lights that shone during that sometimes dark time were visits to her bedside accompanied by my companion, Diva.

Diva is a miniature schnauzer - a small dog with big personality. Diva, sometimes just called D to give her some street credibility, was often the perfect "tonic." When a dog visits a care facility with you, its presence has an immediate impact on the environment. The relief and refreshment of spirit that the dog evokes is evident to everyone. It is as if a window has literally opened and

a breath of fresh air has rolled into what is often an overheated setting and situation. You can see the sense of play that emerges from both staff and residents/patients.

I was aware of studies demonstrating that stroking and touching a dog lowers blood pressure and can calm people who are agitated, but little did I know that, at end of the lead, I had an extraordinary caregiving resource for someone at the end of her life.

The experience of bringing my companion D to visit my mother taught me many things and prompted me to explore the opportunity of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program. Sure, maybe I was a snob about credentials but, I have to tell you, with my professional background, I thought calling the visiting dog program "therapy" was a bit grandiose. However, when D and I went through our assessment to be certified to visit people who would benefit from regular contact with a dog, I was nervous. Would "we" pass? We were evaluated as a team and, after successful completion of the five-step process, we began to "work" at a local retirement residence.

Returning to visit the elderly in a caregiving setting reminded me of the good things about visiting my mother. D was then and is now in her new role able to brighten the lives of many elderly people in their

twilight years. She provides enrichment, a hope to others at a time when life is perhaps smaller than it once was.

One resident talks to D and tells her that she is better than a hundred pills. In these situations, I am clearly, as they say in the business, the dope at the end of the rope. No business suit or white coat here, I am on the floor putting the dog in a position so the residents can experience the benefits of a therapy dog. D enjoys the attention, the treats and the laughter she evokes, and appears to totally accept the circumstances and challenges of all of her visits. D is an example of authentic compassion. She gives hope to others at a time when life experience may be limited. Therapy dogs are completely accepting of people, and being with a dog is grounding for residents or patients.

Dogs provide service in reading programs with children, hospice, police work, search and rescue, guiding and, more recently, with veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress. I imagine asking Diva a question like "What do you enjoy about your work?" And she responds, "Bow wow" – translation: "Well I am just a little dog but, just the same as you, I like being in community, part of a pack, making a difference in the lives of others. I believe in community service and, while it sometimes looks like I am just in it for the treats, it gives me an opportunity to make a contribution. Making people smile, engage in life, is important ruff. Ruff ruff."

Accompanying my dog as she does her work has a positive impact for me, too. I have had the opportunity to meet many caregivers, residents and their family and friends. To know that D's contributions make a difference is reason enough to continue. Being part of the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program gives Diva and me a new *leash* on life. ◀

Paula Cayley is a St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog volunteer. Professionally, Ms. Cayley consults in the areas of health and productivity and is an active member of various administrative tribunals.

What Are Therapy Dogs?

- Therapy dogs are used to provide service and comfort to people in a variety of situations, including people in hospitals, retirement homes, nursing homes, schools, libraries and rehabilitation units; to children with disabilities; or even to people enduring high stress, such as those at disaster sites.
- The terms "therapy dogs" and "service dogs" are often used interchangeably, but they refer to different roles. Whereas service dogs provide services *directly* to their disabled handler, therapy dogs work for a handler who may not have a disability and provide services to *other* people instead.
- "Therapeutic Visitation Animals" are the most commonly employed category of therapy dogs. These dogs are privately owned (i.e. family pets), "shared" by the owner with the public and are used to improve morale generally or provide comfort.
- "Animal-Assisted Therapy Animals" differ in that they are trained specifically to support physical rehabilitation or therapeutic recovery programs. They can help to encourage patients to improve motor skills, balance and interactive skills.
- "Facility Therapy Animals" perform similar roles as Therapeutic Visitation Animals, but differ in that they typically are owned by and live at their place of employment.

Source: Canadian Service Dog Foundation, *Therapy Dogs* (2011), accessed March 4, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1drlj3W>.

St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program

- The St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program is a community- and volunteer-based service that started in 1992 in Peterborough, Ontario.
- The program has since grown, with more than 2,700 therapy dog teams and their handlers now providing help across the country.
- In 2012, the Therapy Dog Program provided more than 190,000 hours of service to Canadians.

Source: St. John Ambulance



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