



Volunteers offer paws that help heal

By CHRIS SHOLLY
Staff Writer
Lebanon Daily News

HERSHEY — Casey and Maggie got a lot of pats yesterday as they did what they do best: Making people, especially patients at Penn State Hershey Medical Center, smile.

The beagles were among about eight dogs who drew a crowd at the hospital as part of Pet Therapy Awareness Day.

The beagles' owner, Cathy Wilson, volunteers at the hospital every Tuesday with her dogs. The dogs are licensed therapy dogs through KPETS (Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services) of Lancaster County.

Wilson, who has been providing her dogs as therapy pets since 1992, said the dogs and their owners visit patients, primarily in the intensive-care units, throughout the hospital. Her current volunteer dogs are Casey, a 7-year-old beagle that has been a therapy dog for six years, and 5-year-old Maggie, who has been doing the job for about a year.

"This is a way for us to get our dogs active and doing something constructive, but it's also a way for us to show our dogs to the community," Wilson said.

Wilson said the dogs sit quietly on a patient's bed and allow the person to stroke them. It helps calm the patient and gives them something to get their mind off their condition, she said.

Wilson said the pets and their owners have some great experiences.

"I personally visited a man (who was in a coma) here every Tuesday night in ICU for three or four months. I came in for a special visit on a Saturday night, and he wheeled himself by and said, 'There's Casey,'" she said. "He remembered her."

Wilson said therapy dogs provide comfort and emotional support as well as physical therapy for patients.

Last week, a physical therapist asked her to bring her dogs by to help a patient with a broken arm.

"The patient was depressed and missing his dog. So when we showed up, he was more than willing to pet the dog and get his arm moving," she said.

The dogs must pass obedience training and a series of similar tests before they can be licensed, she said.

"They have to accept a room full of friendly strangers, and they have to accept other dogs," she said. "They can't be afraid. They can't be nasty."

Ruth Rosado of Allentown came to see the dogs.

"I don't have a dog, but I'd like one," she said.

Rosado said she had a dog, but her family had to sell it when they moved to a new home recently.

Rosado, who was in a wheelchair, happily cuddled several of the smaller dogs, including Wilson's beagle, Maggie, on her lap.

Bobbie Sayer of Ephrata brought her cockapoo, Syretta, to the hospital. She has been bringing her dog to patients for three years.

"The patients really seem to like having her company, and she gets really excited to come here,"

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Sayer said.

Hospital staff enjoy having the dogs around, too.

Dr. Catherine S. Abendroth, a pediatrician, stopped by to pet Syretta.

“How can anyone not feel better after being around a dog?” Abendroth said. “They lift patients’ spirits and keep their minds off other things. It’s an easy loving relationship.”

Dog owner Jessie Sharpe of Hummelstown brought Boone, a mixed Labrador retriever and German shepherd, with her yesterday.

Sharpe said one of her most memorable times at the hospital was when a doctor stopped to pet Boone.

“He got down on the floor. He was holding him, and when he looked at me, he had tears in his eyes. He said he had put his dog down about a week before, and this was the first dog he touched since then,” she recalled. “I’ll never forget that.”

Sharpe said she also has taken Boone to the Palmyra Nursing Home.

“Dogs know. Dogs have this inner feeling, and they know when someone wants them or needs them,” she said. “This dog is very special.”

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