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lanasteronline.com/eedition/.../2305047

Jolene Newcomer pairs off with Gio to 'lift the human spirit'

In The Spotlight

By Barbara Hough Roda, Managing Editor broda@lnpnews.com

Jolene Newcomer is familiar to residents of Luther Acres and Garden Spot Village.

Experience the *Women's Place* difference.

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But the Ephrata woman would certainly have some explaining to do if she visited those retirement communities without an 80-pound, 7-year-old Spinone Italiano at her side.



Gio, sporting his yellow Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services vest, delights people with his shaggy beard and big, sad eyes. Also known as an Italian pointer, he always touches, and is touched, in the process.

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The dog and his handler were recently recognized with Asti's Compassion Sculpture, an imposing travel trophy presented by the Spinone Club of America at its annual meeting last month in Olympia, Wash. Newcomer and Gio could not attend the event, but that didn't mean praise for the pair was sacrificed. As Therapy Spinone for 2011, Gio, who also regularly travels with Newcomer to Ephrata Area Rehab Services, was lauded for helping to "lift the human spirit."

Once a month, Gio and Newcomer also head to the Ephrata Public Library for Kids Reading Tales to Tailwaggers program. He relaxes on a blanket while children in grades one to four, and one at a time, read a book to him. Children's librarian Kim MacNeal, who's nicknamed the dog Sherlock Holmes, said the program encourages "reluctant readers" who might feel intimidated when reading to an adult. It's also a way for kids who love animals, but don't have pets, to get close to a dog, she said.

But does Gio have a favorite author?

"He likes dog books," MacNeal said.

And, Newcomer noted, he doesn't fall asleep.

Age: 53.

Family: Husband Randy; son Benjamin, who lives in Boston; two Spinone fur kids, Gio and Monti.

Employment: Happy Hounds Day Care (a dog day care).

Volunteer work: KPETS, also chair of our church's [Akron Mennonite] library committee.

What people should know about the Spinone Italiano: The Spinone is a very old breed from the Piedmont area of Italy, recognized in this country by American Kennel Club since 2000. A larger dog ranges from around 60 to 90 pounds. They are a sporting dog used for hunting; they are an eager

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ranges from around 60 to 90 pounds. They are a sporting dog used for hunting, they are an eager, energetic hunter; and have a lot of stamina in the field. They are gentle and affectionate, and enjoy being around people. [They] will be a couch buddy in the house. They have a beard, and it does get messy! They really are not an Italian dessert.

Why these dogs are well-suited for therapy: They have a very easygoing and friendly personality with a calm demeanor when visiting. Their eyes are very expressive and have an almost humanlike quality. The Spinone can be playful and clownlike, and often bring a smile just when walking by someone. They adapt well to their surroundings.

Gio is short for: Giovanni.

What Gio has taught me: How to be a better trainer.

What we've both learned from our therapy involvement: Each and every visit is rewarding in its own way and likely to be different. We hear how big a part dogs have played in many people's lives, as they relate stories of dogs they've known. Sometimes just a quick pat or a short walk through a hall will bring a bright spot to a routine day for someone.

What the Spinone Club recognition means to me: This is very special as an acknowledgment of the value of pet therapy, and that the club recognizes the value of the breed for something other than hunting. Therapy dogs provide a tremendous service without much recognition from breed and other organizations. It is an honor to follow in the paw prints of Asti, for whom the [award] is named as he brought to light how well these dogs can do therapy.

Best dog movie: "Best in Show." It is just a fun, funny movie!

For exercise, I: Run agility with both dogs. My husband and I also go to Planet Fitness a few times a week.

A favorite restaurant: Cook's Lobster House on Bailey Island, Maine.

Websites I frequent: Facebook, particularly for the community of Spinone people -- since it is not a common breed we meet there; Weather Underground; L.L. Bean.

I never leave home without: Treats, beard wipes and poo bags.

A cause I wholeheartedly support: KPETS pet therapy.

Winter or summer? Both!

My taste in music: Eclectic, folk, rock.

Coffee or tea? Coffee.

A gadget I can't live without: Paw plunger (for dirty paws) and laptop computer.

On Sundays you're likely to find me: At Akron Mennonite Church in the morning, and taking the dogs to visit my parents at Brethren Village in the evening.

My dad always told me: "Watch out for buggies, bicycles and people walking."n