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# At Harrison, Providing Patient Comfort is a Dog's Life

BY EDIE LAU  
 FOR THE KITSAP SUN  
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Carolyn J. Yaschur | Kitsap Sun Lorraine Doyle of Kingston, a patient at Harrison Medical Center, greets therapy dog Gerardo as his handler Radiation Therapist Jeannette Coil looks on in the waiting room. Doyle said that meeting Gerardo brightened her day.

Heads turned when Gerardo walked into the waiting room at Harrison Medical Center. A woman wearing a blonde ponytail and lavender bathrobe made kissy noises at him. A little girl stared quietly with bright eyes, hoping he would come her way.

Gerardo's partner, Jeannette Coil, smiled. She's used to the way he draws attention. Coil is a radiation therapist who began bringing Gerardo to work when he was a puppy; co-workers, visitors and patients alike have been falling in love with the yellow Labrador retriever ever since.



Carolyn J. Yaschur | Kitsap Sun Harrison Medical Center patient Vivian Brodigan of Bremerton greets Gerardo, a yellow lab who visits patients three days a week. Brodigan has been a volunteer at PAWS for 20 years and appreciated the contact with Gerardo while in the hospital.

The hospital will be seeing a lot more of Gerardo and other equally lovable dogs. Harrison is starting a pet therapy program, bringing specially trained dogs into the medical center to promote healing, comfort and a sense of well-being.

"There's been a lot of research done that interaction with a pet lowers heart rate, lowers blood pressure," said Dana Sheppard, Harrison's coordinator of complementary therapies. "That whole act of stroking (the animal), you get sensory touch stimulation, you get talking, you get interaction. It improves (patients') mood, their communication, and their interaction with staff afterward. There are so many great benefits."

And not just for patients. Coil said some of Gerardo's biggest fans are hospital employees, who need their share of stress-relief, too. "When they have a bad day, they come borrow Gerardo for a while," she said.



Carolyn J. Yaschur | Kitsap Sun Elizabeth Worden, 3, of Port Orchard snuggles with Gerardo in the waiting room at Harrison Medical Center while waiting for her father, who is a patient there. Worden has a yellow lab puppy at home.

Recognition that the company of soft, friendly, domestic animals can enhance health is bringing pets into a rising number of medical facilities. In Washington, at least 34 hospitals, including hospice centers, receive pet therapy visits, according to the Delta Society, a nonprofit organization based in Bellevue that promotes the use of service and therapy animals.

Delta trains pets and pet owners all over the world. Spokesman David Frei said the organization has certified more than 10,000 "pet partner" teams since the early 1990s. "It's a growing activity," Frei said. "People want to do things with their animals. By promoting the use of animals in pet therapy, we give people the opportunity to do something with their animal and to do something as a volunteer for people in need."

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Pam Selz of Hansville decided to train her Great Dane, Magnum, as a therapy pet when she saw how people gravitated to the giant dog — and how gently he responded.

"Magnum is just really laid back," said Selz, who works as a pathology technologist at the University of Washington in Seattle and was familiar with seeing dogs in a hospital setting. "Even at a young age, he handled new things really well. He didn't freak out, he didn't lose his cool," she said. Selz and Magnum made their first hospital visits at Harrison earlier this month and discovered that his size — 135 pounds and 37 inches high at the shoulder — offers a unique advantage. "Because Magnum is so tall, he can walk up to the bedside ... and nobody has to bend down," Selz said.

To prepare the 1½-year-old dog for the job, Selz took Magnum through two sets of basic obedience courses at an hour a week for 12 weeks in all, at a cost of \$140.

Then they took a pre-exam class offered through the Delta Society, which cost \$150 and took four hours scheduled over two Saturdays.

The certification test itself took only 20 minutes.

"They want to see how you handle your dog and how your dog reacts to you," Selz recounted. "They want to know that you have control, that the dog knows 'sit,' 'down,' 'stay' on command, and can walk on a loose leash, accept strangers petting them and combing them. They have you walk through a kind of crowded situation. Someone makes a loud noise behind the dog's back to see how they react.

"A lot of it is how you help the dog get through it. The handler is tested just as much as the dog. They want to see you help your dog succeed."

For Gerardo the yellow Lab, becoming a therapy dog is therapeutic for him, as well. He originally was raised as a guide dog, but failed to meet two of the program's high standards — going to the bathroom only on command, and not barking at the sound of the doorbell, Coil said.

From seeing his behavior at the hospital while he was in training, Coil thought Gerardo would make a fine therapy dog. So she continued bringing him to work with that career change in mind.

When he passed his certification test (recently), he already was an old hand at the job. Making training rounds in the hospital a few days before, Gerardo cheered up Melissa Santos after her radiation treatment. "Oh, his ears are so soft," Santos said, closing her eyes to enjoy the velvety feel.

Next, he visited Vivian Brodigan, a volunteer with the Progressive Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), who was in the hospital with a case of diverticulitis and missing her animal friends.

In the waiting room by the coffee bar, Gerardo said hello to Lorraine Doyle, the woman in the lavender bathrobe who made kissy noises at him. He licked her chin in return. Then he made 3-year-old Elizabeth Worden giggle by nuzzling her face. Her mom, Bobbi Worden, who was waiting for her husband to come out of surgery, said Gerardo reminded them of their own yellow Lab puppy at home, Roxy.

Besides Gerardo and Magnum, Harrison has lined up an English mastiff, another Labrador and a mixed-breed dog to make visits. She is recruiting more. "That'd be wonderful if we had a dog here at any time in the hospital," Sheppard said.

Want to Know More?

For information on becoming a pet therapy volunteer at Harrison Medical Center, call Dana Sheppard at (360) 473-4924 or the hospital volunteer line at (360) 792-6570.

To learn how to become a certified "pet partner" through Delta Society, visit [deltasociety.org](http://deltasociety.org).