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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pet Tales: Therapy dogs bring smiles to patients, staff

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By [Linda Wilson Fuoco](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When a 98-pound Rottweiler calmly strolls through hospital corridors, people take notice. Hanging from Duke's collar are two identification tags -- one from UPMC and the other from Therapy Dogs International Inc.

For the past four months, Duke and his owner, Regis R. Orkwis, of Avalon, have been volunteering in the UPMC Palliative Care Therapy Dog Program at Montefiore and Presbyterian hospitals in Oakland. But before they had a chance to meet and greet patients during a recent visit, the duo was enthusiastically greeted by doctors, nurses and other staff.

"Thank you for bringing us this wonderful gift," a nurse told Mr. Orkwis as she hugged his dog.

"I think dogs are very healing," said Dr. Susan Hunt, an internal medicine specialist and professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine in the palliative care section, which has a goal of managing pain and improving the quality of life for those with serious conditions. It was Dr. Hunt's idea to bring therapy dogs to palliative care patients.

"These are patients who have very serious life-limiting symptoms" including severe and chronic pain, she said.

"Many are here in the hospital for a very long time. Many have cancer. Others have heart, liver or lung diseases," she said.

"I love dogs," said Dr. Hunt, whose personal pet is a three-legged dog named Prairie, adopted from an organization that rescues dogs. Neither she nor the rescuers know how the dog lost its leg.

"Dogs are very healing to people who love dogs," and therapy dogs visit only those patients who want to see them.

The dogs also are a boost for staff members whose jobs are especially stressful because they care for very ill patients, sometimes for a very long time.

Duke and Mr. Orkwis visit patients for two to three hours on their weekly visits. On a recent trip, their first stop was a college-age woman who had been in the hospital only for a couple of days and hoped to be released soon. Most of their other visits were to longtime patients.

Duke quietly walked up to her bed, sat down, made eye contact with her and stuck out his paw.

The young woman grinned, shook Duke's paw, petted and hugged him and asked his owner, "How did you teach him to do all this?"

She stroked Duke and thanked Mr. Orkwis for the visit. "I have a 14-pound cat at home," she said. Many of the patients have pets at home and enjoy talking about them.

Mr. Orkwis, 65, got Duke three years ago, shortly after he retired as a maintenance worker at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children.

"Our elderly dog had just died and we saw an ad in the Pennysaver," Mr. Orkwis said. "A couple getting a divorce had three dogs. He was keeping one dog and she was keeping one. We got Duke for \$25. He was eight months old."

Though a lifelong dog owner, Mr. Orkwis had never done formal obedience training or therapy dog training. It quickly became apparent that Duke was extraordinary -- smart, loving, good with strangers, eager to please, well-behaved and very calm. Meanwhile, Mr. Orkwis was looking for a meaningful retirement activity, and people who admired his dog told him about therapy dogs.

"He didn't even need to go to formal training classes," the proud owner tells patients and staff. On his first try, Duke passed the therapy dog test at the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society and was certified by Therapy Dogs International, which has 18,000 dogs visiting hospitals, nursing homes schools and other venues in the United States and Canada.

"I get as much out of this as the patients do," Mr. Orkwis said.

Other therapy dogs and their owners visiting palliative care patients at Montefiore and UPMC Presbyterian are Joyce Arnowitz, of Squirrel Hill, and Bodhi, a Slovak Cuvac; Dawn Marcus, of Wexford, and Wheatie, a soft-coated wheaten terrier; Sharon Mintz, of Fox Chapel, and Hector, an Aussiedoodle, which is an Australian shepherd and poodle mix; and Jillian Williams, of Bloomfield, and Sarge, an American bulldog/Labrador retriever mix.

Think your dog has what it takes to be a therapy dog? Go to www.tdi-dog.org for more information, including where to go for training and certification tests. In Pennsylvania, that includes the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society on the North Side of Pittsburgh and Golden Triangle Obedience and Training Club, Pleasant Hills.

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