Bide-a-Wee's Pet Therapy Program Helps Hospice Patients Cope

By Jaime L. Tomeo

Wantagh resident Francine Georgia adopted her pet poodle, Arlo, from the Town of Hempstead Shelter when he was just one year old. Little did she know they both would quickly be making a world of difference in many people's lives.

"My friend Kate Alfano is a dog trainer and works with the volunteers' Pet Therapy Program at Bide-a-Wee in Wantagh," she explained. "She felt that Arlo would make a great pet therapy dog because of his temperament. With some help from her, Arlo passed Bide-a-Wee's requirements and was certified as a pet therapy dog."

Georgia began by visiting assisted living facilities and recently started visiting Hospice Care Network patients.

"I did not hesitate, as hospice was there for my family when my father passed away from cancer many years ago," she said. "I do this as a
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tribute to my father, who was also a dog lover."

Pet therapy is designed to promote improvement in human physical, social, emotional, and/or cognitive functioning.

Bide-A-Wee's role is to help Hospice Care Network locate pet owners who may be interested in volunteering.

"They have worked very well with us and it has been very beneficial to both our organizations," explained Hospice Care Network Volunteer Manager Sommer Allen. "They have done a great job at helping us get this program under way."

Joan Stoppa, manager of education and volunteer programs at Bide-a-Wee, said they currently have over 100 volunteers in the program. She said the program is necessary because it is "such a need for some people."

"These are people who loved animals for their whole lives and now that they can't have any animals; it gives them some special warmth," Stoppa explained.

Once a person is chosen they go through Hospice Care Network's 16-hour patient care training program. Since the hospice Pet Therapy Program began last spring, a few of the pet therapists have gone to visit patients at The Hospice Inn. This service is offered by request of the hospice patients or their families.

"Volunteers do whatever we would ask of a patient care volunteer," Allen added.

Allen said most of the people at the Melville hospice center "are in the last week or two of their lives or there for a respite visit."

"If it's a small dog they [patients] can hold the dog, if it's a larger dog, they pet the dog, she explained. "It's a nice, friendly visit and it gives a calming effect. It gives the person something to think about other than what they're going through at that point."

When Arlo visits patients Georgia said he "puts on his pet therapy vest as well as other various outfits and he's ready to go with his tail wagging.

"The patients, as well as the family and staff, really appreciate Arlo's
visits," she added. "It's a diversion for them. It puts smiles on people's faces and helps them focus on something other than the pain, if even for a few brief moments."

Georgia said volunteering with the Pet Therapy Program has given her a new respect for life, as well as an understanding of the dying process.

"I have learned that dying is not to be feared, but respected," she added. "It has taught me how precious my life is as well as the lives of those that surround me. The hospice was there to help those people, their families and honored them and their customs regardless of race or religion."

As for Arlo, Georgia simply stated, "he had a purpose."

"He seems to sense what's going on around him, as his behavior is different than he is at the assisted living facilities," she said. "I believe that fate brought us together that day at the Town of Hempstead Shelter, because this is what we are meant to do."

Hospice Care Network's goal is to extend this program to their other facilities, including their hospice at-home patients. For more information on volunteering with Hospice Care Network, visit www.hospicecarenetwork.org or call 1-800-2-HOSPICE. Bide-a-Wee is a companion animal welfare society which has no-kill adoption centers in Wantagh, Westhampton and New York City. For more information on Bide-a-Wee's Pet Therapy Program visit www.bideawee.org or call 785-4199.