

Border collie's follies brings joy to senior citizens

By Rebecca Bakken | Special to the Kalamazo...

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Edna Engler, 91, asks Toulia to sit as Christine Mahaney and her pet visit senior residents at Bickford Cottage assisted living center in Portage.

PORTAGE — The seniors at Bickford Cottage look forward to the recent arrival of Toula, a black-and-white border collie who makes occasional visits, brightening the day of those at the assisted-living facility.

Toula likes to show off her many tricks, but the mere presence of the dog brought an air of lightness and joy to the residents as they called Toula over for kisses and reminisced about animals they had in the past.

"Look how gentle she is with strangers," said Leona Traub, 88, a Bickford Cottage resident. "That's unusual to have a dog come in and be so receptive."

Traub said in years passed, she and her family had "dogs, cats, birds, you name it." She now has some fish in her room, but she remained enthralled with Toula's presence. Animals, for Traub, provide a sense of camaraderie.

"It amazes me how people tend to open up with a dog and share stories," said Christine Mahaney, Toula's handler.

Mahaney, of Plainwell, and Toula are a multi-talented team as Mahaney trains animals for movies and Toula has appeared in "Public Enemies" with Johnny Depp and will be in an upcoming movie titled "Highland Park," shot and set in Michigan.

More than being in the movies, Mahaney and Toula, a registered therapy dog with The Delta Society, like to make visits to schools and nursing homes to lift spirits and remember those who are sometimes forgotten by society.

The Delta Society is a Bellevue, Wash.-based nonprofit organization that brings people and animals together for positive experiences.

"For me, my heart is in the nursing homes," Mahaney said. "There are many of these people here in our community, but the community tends to forget they're here."

Patty Gesmundo, life enrichment director at Bickford Cottage in Portage, said there were some resident deaths in December and Toula's visits on Christmas Eve and in January helped some of the seniors temporarily forget about the deaths of friends and helped "brighten spirits."

JoAnn Turnbull, marketing director for The Delta Society, said using animals, especially dogs, as therapy for those who are aging or ill can lower blood pressure, reduce stress and encourage a more active lifestyle. In addition, the animals bring happiness to people who are lonely or depressed.

"The animal becomes a bridge," Turnbull said. "They can really help some seniors get re-engaged with life and help them feel a sense of love and compassion. The simple act of petting can reduce blood pressure."

Turnbull said there have even been instances where the presence of an animal can help people go without pain medication for periods of time.

"The interaction with the animal helps them forget about their pain," Turnbull said.

She also said the animals can encourage exercise and recalled an instance at a nursing-home where a patient asked to be wheeled to the dog so she would have enough strength to take it for a walk down the hallway.

There are about 10,000 "teams," that is a dog and its handler, registered with The Delta Society and Turnbull said it's a "win-win situation" for the dogs, the handlers and the people they're helping.

West Michigan Therapy Dogs Inc. is an organization that registers and trains therapy dogs and their handlers. The organization has 57 programs where their dogs provide service to people in hospitals, nursing homes, hospice centers and libraries.

"It's just amazing when you see someone with Alzheimer's (interact with the animals)," said Bruce McLenithan, president of West Michigan Therapy Dogs. "They can't remember their wife's name, but they remember the dog's name from the previous week. The people really do love the dogs."

He said some of the people visited by West Michigan Therapy Dogs don't get visitors otherwise and "they develop a relationship with (the dogs) in a short time."

The organization also has a program called Ruff Readers where the dogs go to libraries and kids can read to them.

"The dogs never tell them they're dumb or don't know the words. It builds confidence," McLenithan said.

The company has grown by 50 percent in the past year and a half, McLenithan said. They have a growing number of requests for the dogs in the Kalamazoo area, but a shortage of dogs to fill the requests.

McLenithan said those with well-behaved dogs in or near Kalamazoo should consider registering with West Michigan Therapy Dogs; more information can be found at www.wmtd.org.

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