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Program gives inmates, dogs...

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Laughter ... and dogs ... are the best therapy



HospiceHouse resident Bill Hunt of Asheboro and therapy dog Kota spend time together on Monday, March 3, 2014. (John E. Abernethy/The Courier-Tribune)

By Julie Bates

Special to The Courier-Tribune

ASHEBORO — When Kota and his handler Anne Evans enter Randolph Hospice House, the atmosphere immediately lightens.

Acertified therapy dog, he is no stranger to facilities that can sometimes be places of sadness. Staff and visitors smile as he comes through the lobby and up to the desk for his schedule. This large yellowLab brings joy to all he meets.

Kota benefits the staff as well as patients, according to Candy Hunter, Hospice House director.

"Wehave four to five deaths a day, every day, so it's good for us when he comes. We try not to get attached to our patients, but we're human."

Hunter came from a hospital where therapy dogs were not used so she did not know what to expect. She quickly realized how beneficial Kota's presence was.



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"It's been great, because he will come and we will go into the rooms and even if the patient is unresponsive, we'll put his hand on Kota's paw and you can just tell, it's a sense of relaxing. It's comforting to the patient and the family because we have all gotten to know Kota."

A special bond

Oneperson Kota sees often is Bill Hunt, Hunter's grandfather, whom she calls "Pop Pop" and others call "Mr. Bill."

Evans notes that if she starts to walk past the room, the big Lab will pull her in there. These two are special friends which is evident from the excited wagging of the dog's tail when he enters the room. The affection is reciprocated as the man in the bed sees him and struggles to sit up. Evans brings Kota closer and encourages him to rise and put a paw on the bed. Mr. Bill reaches out and touches the soft broad head and begins crooning to the dog who gently rests his head near the man. The dog's large dark eyes express his feelings as eloquently as a voice. Kota gives dog kisses to Bill's hand.

Hunter explains that her grandfather had a small dog that died. Given Mr. Bill's poor health, the family elected not to get him another. Kota fills that need. Hunter noted that her grandfather has a prognosis of six months or less. He is oxygen dependent and needs medication for shortness of breath.

"Since he's been here, he's been back and forth a few times where he wasn't doing well. I tell him he's like a cat. He's got nine lives. Kota loves 'Pop Pop.'"

Evans takes a blanket and puts it over the end of the bed. When Kota sees it, he begins to climb up into the bed with assistance from his handler. The dog lies quietly softly thumping his tail. Mr. Bill looks at the dog.

"He's helped bring me around. He's my buddy. I believe he would stay with me," Mr. Bill says. The Lab starts licking his hand. "He wouldn't hurt a flea."

Warm and comforting

Kota's sensitivity to the people he visits is notable. Hunter said the dog knows when death is near.

Evans concurs.

"His demeanor is entirely different when a patient is actively dying. He will go up to the bed and put his head right there. He doesn't try to lick. He's more subdued."

She recalled a WWII veteran. The patient's daughter came to the nurses and said, "My daddy is dying. I know he is dying." They asked her why and she said, "It's Kota. Normally, he would come in and see the daughter and the son and flop down and roll. Instead he went immediately to the man and put his head right there by him."

She said. "I think he knows something. It's in his eyes. They're sad."

"I think her dad died within four or five hours. It's that sensitivity that so many therapy dogs have."

The Labrador's role in comforting families cannot be underestimated and fits in with the Hospice House mission of being a warm and comforting place.

Hospice is not the only facility where therapy dogs can go. Evans has gone to hospitals, nursing homes and schools.

Becoming a therapy dog

Therapy Dogs International, with which Evans is associated, also has a Tail Wagging Tutor Program where dogs go help struggling readers in schools.

Therapy dogs can be any breed, but they have to have the right temperament. They have to get along with children, adults and other dogs. They have to qualify through testing. Therapy Dog training includes Good Citizen training, but there is more to it. They have to be able to "leave it" if a patient drops food or medications on the floor. They have to remain calm even when there are wheelchairs, running people or strange noises. They cannot be a barker. But most of all they have to have that friendly, loving personality.

Three organizations train and test therapy dogs: Therapy Dog International (Evans is an evaluator), Therapy Dog Incorporated and Pet Partners. Each has different testing and training techniques, but the goal is to make sure a dog meets the requirements.

Studies show the benefit of therapy dogs, but Evans can see it firsthand.

"Therapy dogs have changed my life. I have been involved with animals all my life. I think of all the things I have done, the highs, the lows, getting out in the field, nothing touches this."

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