

Comfort Care canine has retirement party

Saturday, June 7, 2008

It wasn't your usual retirement party. No fancy dinner, no gold watch and only one short speech thanking people for coming. And there were a lot of people, maybe 50 or more, at Baptist Medical Center-Beaches last month attending Mr. T's retirement celebration. After four years and three months of seeing patients - that's 30 human years - the 11-year-old Yorkshire terrier left the hospital's Comfort Care program. Four of the 12 Comfort Care canines and their humans who volunteer at the hospital attended the party. There was Buckley, a 7-year-old Italian greyhound, and owner Charlene Maroney; Reggie, a 6 1/2-year-old boxer and Pam Dent; a 7-year-old West Highland terrier named Molly and Jo Doty. The youngest, at age 5, was a standard poodle named Razzle Dazzle, who is a retired show dog, and his person, Linda Kaye. Punch, cheese dips and Triscuits (Mr. T's full name is Triscuit) were served to the humans and the dogs got appropriate treats. The humans also got to dig into a huge cake with Mr. T's photo on it, created by Cinotti's Bakery.

During the past three months, Kam Durham, Triscuit's owner, has been weening him off his visits with patients. In his spare time, she said, he has been training Zoe, a 3 1/2-year-old female Yorkshire terrier, to take over his duties. When Durham was asked if Zoe is as smart as Triscuit, she admitted that she is not.



But she quickly added that when you're young, female and blond, you can go a long way. I can personally vouch for Mr. T's therapeutic effect on patients.

When I spent about two weeks in the hospital last year, a visit from him was the highlight of my day. I'm certain Zoe will do just as good a job. Another amazing part to this story is that Durham, assistant director of nursing and Comfort Care coordinator, flew from Nashville every other week to volunteer with Mr. T, a practice she will continue with Zoe.

Another Comfort Care canine, Johnny, a golden retriever mix, probably couldn't attend the festivities because he was too busy volunteering elsewhere. Before finding a home three years ago with Mary Hall in Jacksonville Beach, Johnny had spent time in two animal shelters. He had been badly neglected by humans. But now the humans who love him, and even depend on him, are too numerous to count. His life as a certified therapy dog is extremely active because Hall is what you would call a committed volunteer.

When Johnny's not visiting people at Harbor Chase or Avanti, she takes him to Baptist Medical Center-Beaches to lift patients' spirits. They also visit McGraw Hospice at the Mayo Clinic and Johnny has even been a greeter dog at Camp Healing Powers, a three-day camp for children who have lost parents or other relatives. Hall and Johnny also go to school, although now that the academic year's over, the dog will have to wait a little while before he returns to Mayport Elementary, where Hall reads to the kindergartners or to hear Neptune Beach Elementary third-graders read to him. At Neptune Beach Elementary, 4-year-old Johnny participates in READ, a national program that improves children's reading and communication skills by having them read out loud to a certified therapy dog. He's been helping children there for two years. Hall said that this school year, four of his students were decidedly international, from Guatemala, Ukraine, Mexico and Russia.

Hall is a lifelong dog lover who admits she doesn't manage her life very well without a canine companion. She's raised nine puppies for Southeastern Guide Dogs. She said Johnny is a bit timid with other dogs and prefers the company of people. Named for St. James because he's so sweet, Hall knew he would be the perfect therapy dog. Together they devote 30 to 40 hours a month volunteering. When Johnny's not with her physically, he's there in spirit.

A semi-retired associate professor emeritus of social work at the University of West Florida, Hall also leads a grief therapy group in which Johnny is referred to often.