PAC’S PALLIATIVE PUPS

The elderly man lay quietly in the bed, seemingly oblivious to the activity around him: the nurses administering pain medication, adjusting his linens, wiping his face and hands. He was dying alone, having outlived his family and friends. Then the dog entered the room. The golden retriever was lifted onto the bed, curling up quietly next to the man’s frail body. At first, there was no indication that the man was aware of the gentle, simple closeness of the dog. But then he lifted his arm and passed it along the soft fur and the strong form of the animal beside him. Peacefully, he drew his last breath.

The UCLA People-Animal Connection (PAC) has long recognized the value of trained therapy dogs in delivering joy and comfort to patients. Over the past year, PAC has been exploring the importance and value of therapy dogs specifically to palliative and end-of-life patients. The soothing presence of a calm, well-trained animal can provide a level of support that a human may not be able to deliver. The result: PAC’s Palliative Pups.

A team of PAC volunteers has offered to be on call to the Palliative Care Department at UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica for the times when a palliative care patient needs the nonjudgmental and comforting presence of a dog. The volunteers and their dogs have gone through the PAC screening and training process as well as an additional level of preparation to become the Palliative Care Volunteers and members of the PAC Palliative Pups team. They visit patients as part of the No One Dies Alone program, providing support not only to the patients, but also their loved ones, including children of dying parents.

STRESSBUSTERS AT POWELL LIBRARY

During finals and the week leading up to them, the UCLA Library’s Stressbusters program gives students a chance to take a break from studying in ways that support their health and well-being. Libraries across campus provide healthy snacks, offer activities such as origami and mindful meditation, and plan events like Silent Disco.

One of the most popular activities is the visit of the PAC therapy dogs to Powell Library. The animals are always a hit with students, who stop by the Rotunda to meet the dogs and talk to their human partners. There is a lot of anticipation on social media prior to the event, and the excitement and appreciation carry over into the students’ interactions with the dogs. The PAC days are a highlight of the quarter at Powell. Students love the chance to decompress by spending time with the pups, and often share stories about their own pets. Some students, who usually spend more time in other areas of the campus, make a trip to Powell just to meet the dogs.

Among the favorites who come to Powell almost every quarter are Kabuki, Logan, Bubbles, Kody, Shepzel, and Scout, although many others also have helped make the students’ day.
MENDING THE HEARTS OF OUR SOLDIERS,
ONE PAW AT A TIME

PAC extended its outreach to UCLA Operation Mend, which heals the physical and emotional wounds of military personnel severely injured during service in Iraq or Afghanistan. UCLA physicians volunteer their time to deliver innovative treatments, such as plastic and reconstructive surgery, while mental health professionals treat not only veterans, but also their family members.

Over the past few years, PAC has sought to augment Operation Mend services with its own version of therapy. Rodger Thomason and his golden retriever, Logan, who have volunteered with PAC for almost five years, have taken the lead in this program. As Rodger puts it, “the least we could do is give some comfort to these brave soldiers who risked their lives for our freedom.”

Rodger and Logan spend anywhere from 10 minutes to more than two hours with each soldier. Some of the veterans are self-conscious about their injuries, but “Logan is the icebreaker,” Rodger says, putting the patients at ease and helping them open up to Rodger, who sees himself as the “human extension of Logan.” Thanks to Logan’s remarkable ability to make patients comfortable, some wounded warriors make more progress in one visit with Logan and Rodger than they do in months of therapy, according to the doctors and nurses who have witnessed these extraordinary moments.

“I have become more compassionate and I have learned to just listen,” Rodger reflects. While he believes that Logan is the superstar and he is just the guy holding the leash, it is obvious that the duo accomplish more together than they could ever do separately, mending the hearts of the soldiers who have gone through overwhelming physical and emotional ordeals.

VOLUNTEER HIGHLIGHT

Marilee Bradford and her dachshund, Tovah, have been volunteering with PAC for 15 years. Marilee recalls how she first got involved:

“In 1999, I read an article in the Los Angeles Times about animal-assisted therapy, and I knew immediately that I wanted and needed to be involved. What a wise decision it was. Participating in PAC has filled a big void in my life over the years and has been tremendously rewarding, challenging, humbling and, most of all, inspiring. I look back at the patients whose lives were made better by Tovah’s restorative presence and I know how lucky I am to be part of that beautiful process.”

Special thanks to Jeannette (Jeannie) Meyer, Jackie Hollada, and Danielle Salomon for their contributions to this newsletter.