CANINE CUPIDS

This Valentine’s Day, Tuesday, February 14, 2017, the canine cupids of People-Animal Connection (PAC) will spread the love to patients and staff at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center and UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica. A group of very lovable canines will deliver handmade Valentine’s Day cards featuring the PAC therapy dogs at 11:00 a.m. The dogs will wear their finest Valentine-themed garments to bring cheer to patients, family, friends, and employees. The PAC team also will offer Valentine’s Day Pet Visit Stations from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. on the lobby floor of Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, near the gift shop and cafeteria, and at UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica in the main lobby. The celebration—a PAC initiative—will doubtless capture the hearts of all.

SPREADING CHEER DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holidays are a tough time to spend in the hospital. Luckily, this past holiday season, the PAC teams brought holiday cheer to many UCLA patients. PAC’s annual caroling took place on December 11, 2016. Decked out in holiday gear, the dogs visited various units throughout the hospital, spreading joy to patients, staff, and visitors. The caroling PAC teams were accompanied by UCLA a cappella singers, The Awechords, and a guitarist. Mattel Children’s Hospital UCLA patients received a special visit from PAC teams, with the dogs arriving in a miniature yellow electric car. A few patients joined them for a ride. PAC volunteers Ellen Morrow, with her dogs Gus and Charley, and Donna Perris, with her dog Tommy, visited patients on Christmas Day. We are thankful to all the wonderful PAC volunteers who made the holiday season less “ruff” for patients and their families.
PAC VISITS AT RENICK NEUROPSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL

The Stewart and Lynda Resnick Neuropsychiatric Hospital at UCLA (RNPH) receives daily visits from PAC volunteers. PAC is a valuable resource for patients during their stay and there are 10 PAC teams dedicated to RNPH. Studies show that visits with PAC therapy dogs lower blood pressure and heart rate and improve patients’ mental well-being. “Patients light up when the dog comes in,” says Robbie Harris, a recreational therapist who works with children and adolescents. “Their attitude, mood, and behavior all improve.” Ellen Morrow, owner of PAC goldendoodles Charley and Elbee, has seen many moving interactions between dogs and patients. One teenage boy was so withdrawn, he would not come into the group therapy room. After a few PAC visits, he was hugging Elbee and even whispered, “I love you.” Recreational therapists work side-by-side with occupational therapists to make sure that all patients have the opportunity to take part in the 10- to 20-minute sessions. Children and adolescents who have been withdrawn, or even aggressive, become cooperative when a dog enters the room. “One minute they’re depressed, and the next they’re smiling and interacting,” says Harris. “The dogs know when they are working and they have a strong sense of purpose,” Morrow says. “They are miracle workers on leashes.”

PAC volunteer Lynne Grande and her dog, Leo, visit patients on the adult psychiatric units.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Laura Botfeld and her poodle Apollo have been volunteering with PAC for more than 10 years. As Apollo is retiring, we want to honor him for the countless patients he has helped. Laura recalls how she first got involved with PAC:

“What inspired me to join the PAC program was my own experience of being hospitalized in a critical condition. As I lay in my hospital bed, alone and afraid, I saw a golden retriever walking past my doorway and it immediately calmed my nerves. Seeing a friendly dog in the hospital inspired me to become a therapy dog handler and join the program in 2006.”

One particular visit stands out for Laura. “A father came running out to the hall and begging me to bring Apollo to sit on the bed with his 10-year-old daughter, who lay in a coma in the PICU unit. Apollo sat on her bed, facing her, nose to nose, and stared at her blank eyes for what seemed like an unusually long time. The father wanted Apollo be close to his daughter, so he put her small hand on Apollo’s big, fluffy head and kept repeating, ‘Apollo is here, Apollo is here.’ After we left the room to continue our rounds, we received notice that the little girl had suddenly awakened from her three-week, critical comatose state and her first words were ‘Where’s Apollo?’

Later, the girl shared with me that she did not recall anything about being in a coma or having been hospitalized for weeks. She only remembered seeing a funny dog’s nose in front of her making her laugh, though her words would not come out... and then she suddenly awoke. Her mother told me that she believed she had witnessed a miracle: a dog helping save her child’s life.

I have been grateful to be a volunteer with the UCLA PAC program, which recognizes that dogs have a special ability to comfort and connect with people in sensitive ways. My mission with Apollo (who was named after the space mission) has always been to help patients heal.”

Though we are sad to see Apollo leave the program, Laura will continue volunteering with her other dog, Georgia, a black poodle. We are excited to welcome Georgia to the PAC team.

Each gift transforms the patient experience and helps to ensure that the PAC program can continue to serve our UCLA Health family. If you would like to make a donation to support our programs, please contact:

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