



Providing Smiles

by: Dottie Deems & Gwenn McKenzie

In 2005, Vacaville resident Dottie Deems fulfilled a promise made to honor her mother in a unique way. "My mom lived with dementia for the last eight years of her life in a small assisted-living facility in Los Angeles. My sister was nearby, but busy raising a family. I was four hundred miles away and unable to visit as frequently as I liked," stated Dottie. Dottie knew that her mom's final years were spent, not with visits by friends and family filling her days, but often alone as she drifted farther into the abyss of dementia until she scarcely spoke or acknowledged family members. To honor her mother's memory, Dottie decided to find a way to bring warmth and smiles to seniors in her own community.

Although she pursues a full-time career as an insurance claims adjuster and volunteers as a Solano County Certified Master Gardener, Dottie made room in her life for more volunteer work. Dottie and her Irish terrier, Gracie, became a Delta Society Pet Partner® team in order to perform volunteer animal-assisted therapy activities. Generally defined as any non-judgmental interaction of a loving animal with an individual, animal-assisted therapy has been practiced as an organized volunteer activity for close to fifty years. The medical and morale-boosting benefits to the recipient are well-documented. Delta Society is a premier international organization that tests and registers volunteer teams who visit assisted-living centers, hospitals, nursing homes, adult and juvenile detention facilities and schools. Dottie attended meetings; then she and Gracie were tested by the Delta Society for registration as a Pet Partner® team.

"We passed the test on our first attempt and then set out to find a group of other volunteers and a location to visit. While many Delta teams work alone, I wanted the support of a group, and with the help of Delta, I found an organization called Loving Animals Providing Smiles, LAPS for short."

LAPS was founded ten years ago in Napa by three individuals with many years of hands-on experience in animal-assisted therapy and professional pet training. Today, LAPS has approximately twenty teams volunteering in Napa and Solano counties.

LAPS is an independent, 501(c) (3) non-profit, all-volunteer organization with members living in Solano, Sonoma and Napa Counties. Its founding principle was that stable, well-trained teams working together can bring quality animal-assisted therapy to a variety of settings safely and effectively. To that end, all teams are first registered with Delta Society's Pet Partners® program. That registration process includes a study course, pet health certificate and series of practical scenarios conducted under the direction of a Delta-certified evaluator. While Delta Society will register most kinds of domesticated pets, including cats, bunnies, birds and horses, each pet must pass a behavior test to show it is well-socialized and appropriate for the intended client population. For volunteers bringing a pet dog into therapy work, LAPS has designed an eight week training class covering a wide range of skills the new team will need to be successful. "LAPS uses these training hours to give the team practical experience in meeting the real-life challenges in a variety of therapeutic situations," says Dottie. "Many LAPS members come in to roleplay for the students and offer advice. We bring in young people so we can assess the dogs' behavior around children and teens. I don't know of any other animal-assisted therapy group that puts as much effort into training and supporting their teams as LAPS does."

Once the team successfully passes the Delta Society evaluation, they enter a three month probationary period with LAPS under the guidance of seasoned handlers and trainers. Multiple teams generally attend visiting sessions. Dottie says, "We support each other and make sure the appropriate team visits with each of our clients. We have big dogs and small dogs and even a very well-behaved cat making visits currently."

Dottie has visited at Paramount House in Vacaville for the past five years, first with Gracie and now with Gracie's housemate, Logan, a top-winning conformation show dog. "Logan never had a day of doggie obedience school before I decided to see if he would enjoy being a pet therapy dog. It was so different with Gracie who started her obedience training at nine weeks of age and earned multiple AKC obedience titles." Dottie admits that terrier breeds can try one's patience, but she has over twenty-five years of experience in the breed, serving in various capacities in the Northern California Irish Terrier Club. She explained that Irish Terriers can be a handful and even become dog aggressive if not well-socialized. "Logan watched me practice obedience work with Gracie in the old days, so he seemed to pick up heeling, sit, stay and down on his own." Dottie knew from working with Gracie that a successful therapy dog needs underlying obedience skills in addition to a suitable temperament, so she worked with Logan until he, too, successfully passed the Delta and LAPS evaluations."

Twice a month, Logan is bathed and groomed for his visits at Paramount House. He wears his purple bandana with the LAPS logo, matching Dottie's purple polo, to make the visits. Dottie and Gracie or Logan

visited as a single team when there were no other LAPS members residing in eastern Solano County. "It was lonely making visits without another team, but that all changed recently when Fairfield resident Sheryl Mc-Namare and her Bernese Mountain Dog, Shania, started visiting with us." Now Paramount House residents have two teams making regular visits.

The visits at Paramount House are arranged so that Dottie and Logan, now with Sheryl and Shania, can meet and spend a few minutes with as many residents as possible. Dottie says, "We get to Paramount House when the residents are going to and from dinner. We meet and greet everyone who passes by. Logan never stops wagging his tail. We bring smiles and warm words to all we greet."

Volunteerism is very important to Dottie. "Being a LAPS team is my way of giving to others. I'm paying it forward, so to speak. I can enjoy my dog and our bond is much stronger since we've been active in LAPS. I truly believe that the human-animal bond is strong enough to reach across the boundaries of loneliness and even dementia," said Dottie.

For more information about LAPS or animal-assisted therapy, please visit www.lovinganimalsprovidingsmiles.org, contact a volunteer at P.O. Box 6596, Napa, CA 94581 or call 707-265-6642. ■

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