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Dianne Heller (L) of Dover with therapy dog Tipper, Pat Williams of Dover with Sarge and Jane Klopfer of Dover with Boomer pose at Williams' residence Thursday.

By Julie Watts

The Times-Reporter

Posted Apr 04, 2009 @ 11:12 PM

Whether they woof or whinny, animals and their owners are aiming to make their mark in the medical community in animal-assisted therapy programs and activities.

Jane Klopfer of Dover and her 12-year-old chocolate English Lab Boomer have volunteered with Aultman Hospital's Happy Tails program for five years. Joyce Polen of Stone Creek is in the process of opening Pickles Therapeutic Riding Center for equestrian-based therapy sessions.

Klopfer said volunteering in animal-assisted activities was something she'd always wanted to try after watching friends Diane Heller and Pat Williams, both of Dover, take their dogs for visits to other hospitals and nursing homes. The experience of helping people is rewarding to her, especially when she sees people eager to rub Boomer's velvety ears and share their own pet stories.

To participate in Happy Tails, Klopfer and Boomer had to first become certified. They attended the Delta Society's Pet Partners – a service animal organization – program at Aultman Hospital.

Boomer also had to be examined by a veterinarian for diseases and given a clean bill of health.

Before making a visit to the hospital, Boomer must be groomed at least 24 hours in advance.

Klopfer said there are days when Boomer never leaves the parking lot or makes it past the hospital lobby as he greets people. In patient's rooms, she's watched the tension of being ill wash off of faces and replaced with smiles instead.

"They are an ambassador of love," she said of the dogs in the Happy Tails program.

Although Boomer has slowed down as he's gotten older, Klopfer said he prances like a puppy when the two pull into Aultman's parking area and Boomer is outfitted in his green Delta Society vest and red Happy Tails bandanna.

"He knows he's going to work," she said.

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Locally, Klopfer and Williams also volunteer with the Tuscarawas Area Kid Network's READ program, which allow children of all ages or disabilities to practice their reading skills by reading out loud to the dogs. The organization has an office inside the First United Church of Christ at New Philadelphia. Klopfer has participated in the program for two years, and instances of hesitant children eventually approaching Boomer to pet him are the "little things" that make it worthwhile.

Aultman Hospital Nurse Carol Scarpino of Massillon said the presence of an animal can lower blood pressure and reduce stress and anxiety. She has been with the hospital for 19 years, and her research and work on animal-assisted therapy helped earn the hospital's Magnet award for nursing excellence from the American Nurses Credentialing Center.

With the assistance of the Delta Society, Scarpino spearheaded the effort to debut Aultman's Happy Tails program for dogs in 2002, which has grown from eight to 13 teams of handlers and their dogs. She said that bringing canines into the environment is beneficial to patients because they offer non-judgmental and unconditional love to those they meet.

"Dogs don't care if you're wearing a hospital gown or if your hair is messed up," Scarpino said. The presence of the Happy Tails teams also provides Aultman's staff with a pick-me-up during hectic days.

"Doctors need relief from the stress just as much as anybody," Scarpino said.

Some nursing stations keep treats on hand for the dogs, which Klopfer said Boomer remembers when they travel to Canton to make their rounds at Aultman.

Joyce Polen, executive director of non-profit Pickles Therapeutic Riding Center, hopes to bring the benefits of equestrian therapy to the area. Her riding center is scheduled to open on May 11 and can accommodate people with all types of disabilities.

"Our main goal is to let that person focus on their goals by increasing their confidence," she said.

The unusual name of Pickles Therapeutic Riding Center came from a joke her daughter told several years ago while driving past a miniature horse farm in Tennessee. While passing the horses, Polen's daughter exclaimed "Look at all the little pickles!" The name stuck and Polen decided to use it for her riding center because of its uniqueness.

Before moving back to Ohio with her family, Polen volunteered for four years at an equestrian therapy center in Virginia called A Leg Up. She started off by volunteering a few hours a week and eventually found herself spending up to 70 hours a week at the center.

"It was something I loved and couldn't get enough of," she said.

She has been working on her riding center for two years and recently moved to a part-time position at the Holiday Inn at New Philadelphia to allow more focus on the center. She has 10 volunteers lined up and three horses. Instructor Kasey Coleman of Newcomerstown is taking classes to become certified by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Assn. Coleman will also help train the horses for the classes. The horses will be exposed to all types of equipment and possible scenarios to ensure the safety of the rider and volunteers.

"They have to be basically bomb proof," she said.

Polen said horseback riding can aid amputees and riders with cerebral palsy, autism, brain injuries or multiple sclerosis. It can improve posture, balance, motor skills, coordination and muscle tone and can also help with sensory and respiratory problems. For those who are wheelchair bound, riding can give a sense of walking to the rider.

A typical session at Pickles Therapeutic Riding Center will be between 30 to 60 minutes long, depending on the needs of the client as recommended by a doctor or therapist. Only riding pads will be placed on the horse's back and rings will be used for stirrups. Polen said that using this equipment instead of a traditional saddle allows the rider to feel the movement and warmth of the horse. All riders will also be required to wear a helmet while riding or in the arena, and volunteers will be placed at the horse's head and on both sides of the rider for stability.

Polen said that her experiences with horses and therapy has been rewarding.

"It's so exciting," she said. "It gets deep down in their soul."

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