

Aging Lifestyles: Still man's (and woman's) best friend

by Joe_Volz

Maggie is a regular visitor at the Audubon Villa nursing home in Litz, Pa. She is a golden retriever.

Maggie and her owner, Ginny Wiskeyman, are volunteers with the Animal Assisted Therapy program of the Susquehanna Valley.

The late Dean Martin (no relation to the singer) was one of Maggie's first clients to visit. A multiple sclerosis patient, Martin couldn't speak, sit up or control his arms. Ginny put Maggie on a chair so Dean could see her. He responded with a smile, indicating his pleasure.

"At first, I was uncomfortable because I didn't know how to communicate with Dean. But after a couple of weeks it wasn't hard at all. He couldn't respond but I could tell from his eyes that a visit from Maggie and me brightened his day." Maggie isn't the only dog making regular visits to nursing homes. Nursing homes across the country are implementing programs where animals form part of therapy.

After years of banning pets because they were considered loud nuisances or health hazards, many in the elder care business are changing their minds. Listen to what Marguerite Herrold, a 12-year veteran as a volunteer at Audubon Villa says: "Animals and older people have a natural affinity for each other."

She tells of bringing her dog Happy to visit.

A 100-year-old woman thanked Marguerite for the visits, explaining that as a child, she longed for a dog but her parents refused. Then, as a wife, her husband refused her desire for an animal.

"So thank you so much for visiting and bringing Happy," she said. But dogs aren't the only visitors to the nursing home. Marguerite's cat Smokey also comes. Smokey's favorite perch is a wheelchair and, allowing herself to be pushed around to visit various people.

The Eden Alternative also uses animals as therapy in its nursing homes. It strives to set up an environment as close as possible to that of a home. This includes cats and dogs, hamsters and birds as permanent residents.

One of a handful of reforming approaches in the long-term care industry, the Eden Alternative was

created by Dr. William H. Thomas and his wife, Judy Meters Thomas. Their pilot project was the Chase Memorial Nursing Home in upstate New York.

Thomas' philosophy is that the plagues of loneliness, helplessness and boredom account for the bulk of suffering among older people. So the Eden Alternative communities' goal is to ease the causes of the suffering. Two of its principles are:

1. An elder-centered community contributes to creating a human habitat where life revolves around close and continuous contact with plants, animals and children.

2. Loving companionship is the antidote to loneliness. Elders deserve easy access to human and animal companionship.

At Brewster Place Retirement Community in Topeka, Kan., an Eden Alternative home, a staff member noted that animals give the different generations a way to communicate. It provides children an ongoing way to relate to older people over a mutual interest in animals.

What is the effect of including animals in nursing homes?

Scientific research is limited to date. Thomas, though, conducted research at the Eden Alternative's pilot project in New York, finding a 26 percent reduction in turnover of nurse's aides and a 50 percent drop in patients' infection rates. Other studies have questioned whether the positive results are long lasting. One looked at the impact of a resident dog on social interaction between residents and staff. It concluded that initially the resident dog was a catalyst for social interaction. However, it was short lived, disappearing within three months. The jury is out so far partly because it is difficult to design and conduct scientifically valid research about the possible influence of pets on elderly people who live in nursing homes.

RESOURCES

The Delta Society, 875 124th Ave. N.E., Bellevue, WA, 98005; 425-679-5500. www.deltasociety.org

Eden Alternative: 111 Blue Oak Lane, Wimberley, TX 78676; 512-847-6061. www.edenalternative.com

Brewster Place: 1205 SW 29th St., Topeka, KS, 66611; 785-274-3350; www.brewsterplace.org

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