

# Paws for Healing: Therapy dogs celebrate five years at Naval Station Norfolk

By MC1 (AW) Tim Comerford | The Flagship Staff Writer

**NORFOLK** -- The United Service Organizations (USO), in Naval Station Norfolk's Building J-50, celebrated five years of support by its four-legged therapists, Jan. 11. Every Wednesday from 10 a.m. to Noon, volunteers bring in their dogs to socialize with service members. These dogs are more than mere pets, they are certified therapists through a program from Therapy Dogs International (TDI).

Animals and humans have been companions for centuries, perhaps even to prehistoric times, but the first known therapeutic use of animals started in Gheel, Belgium in the ninth century. The earliest uses of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) in the United States were for psychiatric patients, where the presence of the therapy animals produced a beneficial effect on both children and adults with mental health issues. In the last few decades, AAT has been applied in therapeutic settings including: schools, prisons, hospitals, hospices, nursing homes and outpatient care programs.

There are literally hundreds of organizations dedicated to AAT, with most being available at the state level, and several national and international. Most of them have their own rules for AAT animal certification and handler certification, with some of them referring animals/handlers to other accredited organizations for certification and registration.

The same building that hosts the USO also hosts the Naval Military Processing Site (NMPS), which gets Sailors ready for deployment as Individual Augmentees. These Sailors are often sent far from home in stressful situations to help other services in Afghanistan or Africa. That was one of the reasons the volunteers wanted to come to this particular USO.

"In our first year in 2007, they contacted me," said Ann Morris, Director of NMPS on Naval Station Norfolk, of the pet therapy volunteers. "They wanted to present a program they felt might do well in here with troops going over seas, Wounded Warriors and the young Sailors. It has been with us ever since."

Sometimes the dogs stop by Naval Station Norfolk on Saturday mornings just so the troops that are going on to the next part of the IA training have some comfort. Whether a Wednesday or a Saturday, the dogs are something the service members really appreciate.

"I love seeing the dogs," said Personnel Specialist 2nd Class Laura Gulling from Reserve Component Command Region Mid-Atlantic Medical Hold. "I miss having a dog."

"Everybody likes them, they help out a lot," said Aviation Electrician 2nd Class Ernest Lozano, who is part of the Wounded Warrior program and a volunteer at USO. "They make a difference to someone who is coming back from deployment - a lot of them haven't petted a dog in a long time. I look forward to Wednesdays when they come by. Bella is really just full of energy and love."

The reasons that people volunteer to bring their dogs to the USO is similar.

"Specifically, the USO was to honor my grandparents," said Lisa Rapacki, whose dog, Jack, is a Dachshund pet therapist from Norfolk. "My grandfather was retired Navy and my grandparents lived all over the world and used the

USO. When they both died I missed them greatly and I thought the USO would be a great way to honor my grandparents."

"I started down at the library and one of the ladies down there mentioned starting a new program and I told her, 'I would like to do that,'" said Isabelle Pollard, a native of Virginia Beach, who has been coming to the USO since her Labrador Retriever, Katie, received pet therapy certification four years ago. "I enjoy coming down here. I grew up in the military. My dad was career Navy."

"When I was looking to adopt, I was looking to do therapy work specifically for the military," said Cat Kaisler the handler for a three legged mix breed dog, Bella Star. "I am the daughter of a military family and it's just my way of giving back."

Only one of the pet owners had no military in her family, but she was convinced by her practice.

"I have a physical therapy practice and I have treated several of the military wives in the area. I thought I could give back to the community, and in this case, the military," said Jennifer Watson, owner of Great Dane pet therapist, Justice.

Research noted in The Journal of Behavioral Medicine in 1988 stated human-dog interactions showed talking to and petting a dog lowers blood pressure in a person. Touch appeared to be major component of the pet effect, while cognitive factors contributed to a lesser degree.

Many skills can be learned or improved with the assistance of a therapy animal. Patient rehabilitation can be encouraged by such activities as walking or running with a dog, or throwing objects for the animal to retrieve. Fine motor skills may be developed by petting, grooming, or feeding the animal. Patient communication is encouraged by the response of the animal to either verbal or physical commands.

But not just any pet can become a pet therapist. Rapacki has four dogs with three out of the four being trained as therapy dogs.

"I have been training therapy dogs for six years," she said, who also works as a therapy pet evaluator for TDI.

She explained that there are certain conditions a dog must be able to cope with to become a therapy dog, and not all therapy pets are dogs. Birds, cats, cows and llamas are all stated to be able to become therapy pets.

"At this nursing home there was a lady who had this gigantic cat," said Rapacki. "It was bigger than you have ever seen - bigger than Jack. She would come in and the older ladies just loved the cat. She would just put the cat on someone's lap and they would start petting it. You could see the calmness come over their faces."

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