

VETERINARY MEDICINE'S FOUR-FOOTED
PHARMACISTS DELIVER MEGADOSES OF WAGS
AND LICKS TO PATIENTS ALL OVER TOWN.

PUPPY LOVE

BY JANINE LATUS MUSICK
PHOTOS BY ROB HILL



There's no therapist in the world like a good dog. The simple joy of petting an animal lowers blood pressure, reduces pain and raises spirits. That's the idea behind the College of Veterinary Medicine's pet-therapy program, which brings 35 dogs, one cat, one bunny (and the 28 people who tend them) to visit area hospitals and nursing homes. It's called Pet Assisted Love and Support, or PALS, and it's smaller but similar to the nationally prominent Delta organization.

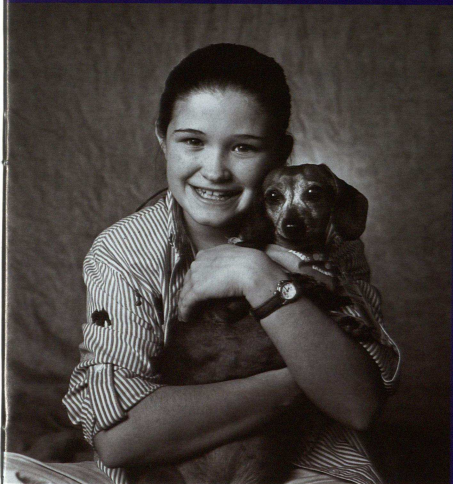
"The animals give our patients unconditional love and attention," says Nora Hager, a child-life specialist at Children's Hospital at University Hospital and Clinics. "They don't care who you are, what's wrong with you or how you look, they just want to snuggle up."

For six years, the animals have created a connection for patients and their families who feel isolated and afraid. After all, it's hard to be lonely when there's a dog nuzzling your nose. Take the case of a teen-ager, depressed by intense chemotherapy treatments, who sighed with relief when a visiting Brittany spaniel curled up on the bed with him. "That made him feel so good, to know that that dog wanted to be with him," Hager says. "It gave him a break from his anxiety and pain."

Older people respond in much the same way. At Boone Hospital Center, a woman insisted that a visiting dog climb up on her lap as she reminisced about dogs gone by. "I have a cat now," she says, "but cats just aren't dogs, now are they?"

"It's amazing to watch when the dogs go around," says child-life specialist Sarah Key. "The kids' faces light up. They start laughing, and then the parents start laughing and they're all telling stories about their own pets and about home. It's the one thing they all look forward to while they're here."





NAME: SCARLETT
BREED: DACHSHUND
OWNER:
ANDREYA EVANS

Scarlett, a miniature dachshund, gets all excited when she sees her orange bandanna with the name tag that identifies her as an official member of PALS.

"She starts wagging her tail and wiggling," says Andreyeva Evans, 11, of Columbia. "She likes to visit people."

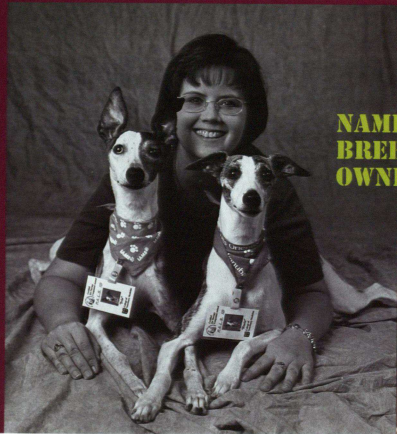
Indeed she does. She climbs up on laps, licks chins and cheeks, or rests quietly in the arms of Andreyeva's father, Tim Evans, MS '96, a graduate student in veterinary medicine.

The first visit of the day is with a woman who has had a stroke. "Would you like to see the dog?" Tim asks. The woman, who has not responded to anyone else, blinks her eyes, "yes." Then she surprises everyone by raising her hand and scratching the dog's nose. A staff member ducks her head and walks from the room, tears in her eyes, to tell the nurses.

Andreyeva and Tim visit the hospital at least twice a month.

"I do it because it makes people happy," Andreyeva says, "and watching them get happy makes me happy."





NAME: IRIS AND ROSIE
BREED: WHIPPET
OWNER: SUSAN SCZEPANSKI

It's Iris and Rosie night at Children's Hospital, and some of the children are already gathered in the activity room to greet the dogs. The two whippets will visit 20 or 30 children, doing the same four tricks over and over, and loving it every time. The kids love them back.

"We'll take one of the dogs to the room of a child who's been feeling awful or recovering from surgery, and suddenly the child is smiling, talking and laughing," says Sarah Key, the child-life specialist. "Even if they're shy with the adults, they'll open up and talk to the dogs or the person who brings the dogs, because it's a little bit of the normal world."

Susan Sczepanski, AB '87, DVM '91, a veterinarian at Horton Animal Hospital, brings her "girls" once a week.

"Rosie is having a love affair with a 17-year-old boy who has been in and out of the hospital for about six months," Sczepanski says. "She immediately jumps on his bed and licks his face. They've got quite a thing going."



NAME: LOGAN
BREED:
GOLDEN RETRIEVER
OWNERS:
JEFF AND JULIE SMITH

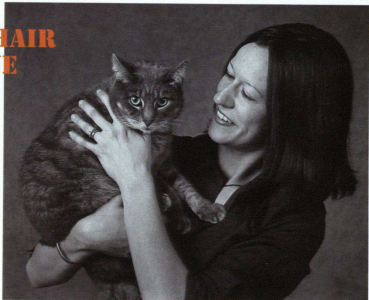
NAME: GRENDEL
BREED: DOMESTIC SHORTHAIR
OWNER: SUSAN SHIVELBINE

Grendel, a domestic shorthair, is the lone cat of the group. She and veterinary student Susan Shivelbine visit residents of Candlelight Lodge, inspiring trips down memory lane and long conversations about long-ago pets.

"They don't spend much time with Grendel, just maybe pat her a few times," Shivelbine says, "but then they'll start to talk with me and ask questions about the cat, and it's a stimulus. They start talking, and it brings back memories of good times past."

"I thought it was wonderful to have them there," says Mary Smith of Columbia, a former cat owner who spent about five weeks at Candlelight. "The days get kind of long, and having a cat visit really brightened my day." Shivelbine participates because her own grandmother spent some time in long-term care.

"I hope that someday if I'm ever sick or injured in a nursing home that people will come and visit me with animals. They're important."



Logan sits patiently, quivering in anticipation, until Grant Toomey, 17, of Jefferson City, tosses the ball. Then he's off, dragging veterinary student Jeff Smith across the playground as half a dozen teen-agers laugh.

Grant, who has cystic fibrosis and spends much too much time in the hospital, looks forward to the dogs' visits. "The rest of the day is OK," he says, "but we're always wanting to know when the dogs are coming to play."

The dogs look forward to it, too, yelping and prancing around in the car as they approach the hospital. But they calm down immediately as they walk through the doors.

"Our dogs can be hyper around us and our friends, but when we go into the hospital they're very gentle," says Jeff's wife, Julie. "They seem to have an innate sense of what they need to do."

They'll lie still so a child can cry into their fur, or sit quietly under a parent's hand. "There are times when the parents will just sit and pet the dogs for as long as we'll let them," Julie says. "I think they're as much help for them as they are for the children." ❁