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Animal-Assisted Therapy Program Team of the Month – December 2011 Karen Jara & Meg



Meg and I have been involved in animal-assisted therapy since the summer of 2009. We first began visiting at Colorado Hematology & Oncology on the Sky Ridge Medical Center campus. Meg is very fond of Dr. Miller and his physician assistant, John. Dr. Miller is a lab lover, having owned a black lab for 14 years, and he always greets Meg with a vigorous ear rub. When we enter the building, Meg is always on high-alert watching and listening for Dr. Miller. She greets him with the same level of enthusiasm as he gives her ears a rub.

We enjoy the intimate setting at Colorado Hematology & Oncology and visiting with the patients as they receive their medications. One time while visiting, we were greeted by a patient of Dr. Miller's as we were exiting the elevator. The patient exclaimed, "Meg, I remember you as the dog that made me feel better during my blood draw". In August of 2009, Meg and I added visitations to patients on the adult surgery and orthopedic floors at Sky Ridge. We easily experience over two dozen contacts in an hour and a half of visit time. As we make our way through Sky Ridge building, Meg enjoys greeting several of her "regulars". I feel we provide a great service by visiting the patients but I see the staff as equally deserving of pet therapy and I know we have an impact on them as well. Meg's tail wags when she sees Vicki who works as an occupational therapist and Kelly one of the nurses on the 6th floor and Robert in transportation. It is not unusual for us to visit with people of all ages in the lobby, in the elevator, or in the lobby area on the floor prior to making visit to individual patient's rooms. Meg is thriving as an ambassador for animal-assisted therapy.

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On the way into the building we have even been approached by the Flight for Life team members. They called out to us, asking if Meg was one of those therapy dogs because “they could sure use some therapy”! We were more than happy to stop and receive their attention next to the helipad. We’ve also been stopped by paramedics servicing their ambulances near the emergency room entrance. I personally like the idea that we can provide a few minutes of comfort to a big burly fireman/paramedic knowing that time spent with Meg can take his mind off what he sees in his line of work.

When school is in session, Meg & I also visit at Pine Grove Elementary in Parker. For the past 3 years, we have had the pleasure of spending an hour each Friday doing one-on-one reading sessions with two students. Sometimes I read to the student and sometimes the student reads to Meg. Occasionally a student’s teacher will assign a specific task to be completed with Meg’s help! One visit in particular stands out for me. During our early days visiting at Pine Grove, one of our students was working on writing sentences and sentence structure. The student wrote the following descriptive sentences regarding Meg: “Meg is calm. Meg is a girl. Meg is 21 in dog years. Meg likes to have her ears rubbed and her belly scratched. Meg loves to go on walks and sniff.” About a month later, this same student was given an assignment to write a paragraph about Meg. He was to use a topic sentence, descriptive sentences, and a concluding sentence. This is what he wrote: “Meg is a therapy dog. Meg is calm when in the school. I enjoy working with Meg. It is easier to concentrate with Meg. When I touch her head Meg is as soft as a pillow. I feel important while walking in the hallway with Meg.” This brought tears to my eyes. My dog had made a very powerful connection with a child, very similar to the connection I feel with Meg.

I know research supports what we do as handlers and animal-assisted therapy teams. We can lower a patient’s blood pressure, distract a patient from pain and worry, provide comfort, and be someone who doesn’t want anything from them as a patient except to say hello. The moments where Meg and I provide “fur therapy” to the Flight for Life team or a paramedic, help a Doctor recall fond memories from a time when he had a similar dog, give a patient a few minutes of our attention, or offer a child a boost of self-confidence – these are the goose bump moments that keep me doing this volunteer work.