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Seniors Reap Health Benefits from Animal Interaction

By Jennifer Wake



Lafayette resident Ruth Barcelon, 80, stays active looking after her one-year-old puppy, LuLu, as well as caring for her chickens, doves and pheasants in her backyard aviaries Photo Jennifer Wake

Orinda resident and photographer Albert Glocker, 89, always loved his pets, and has even won awards for photography of his animals. Now a patient at Manor Care near Rossmoor, he rarely speaks - that is, until his daughter, Lynn, comes to visit with Cody and Copper: A 10-year-old Australian Shepherd and an 8-year-old Australian Shepherd/Border Collie mix.

"With my father, it is the highlight of his day to see the dogs," Glocker says. "When I arrive with Copper and Cody, he smiles and loves to watch them. He will pet them and be more alert when they are around him. I feel fortunate that Manor Care has allowed me to bring Copper and Cody with me on my visits. He loves them, and they respond in kind."

Manor Care is one of several facilities which caters to Lamorinda residents and understands the importance of pets in the well-being of their patients' lives, allowing visits from family pets or through therapy pet programs. Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation (ARF) has recently seen an increase in demand for pet therapy offered through their Pet Hug Pack program, which brings both dogs and cats to facilities including Las Trampas in Lafayette, Aegis of Moraga, Woodland Nursing Inn in Lafayette, and Lamorinda Adult Respite Center in Orinda.

"The increase in demand seems to be due to an increased awareness of the benefits animals bring to seniors," says ARF People Connect Manager Erika Hart.

A 1999 study published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society found that independently living seniors who have pets tend to have better physical health and mental well-being than those that don't.

Some residential homes for seniors in other states have even seen a drop in mortality rates after incorporating birds, dogs, cats, and even outdoor rabbits and chickens, into facility programs. Others are allowing pet ownership because of the health benefits they see with their residents, including reduced blood pressure and heart rates, as well as lower incidences of depression.

"For a senior living alone, a pet is wonderful," Glocker says. "They give unconditional love, are soft to touch, and are great listeners."

Lafayette resident Ruth Barcelon, 80, says having pets provides companionship and keeps her busy. "You have somebody depending on you and somebody to take care of."

Barcelon has a one-year-old Tibetan Terrier, LuLu, as well as chickens, doves and two pheasants filling aviaries in her backyard. She climbs the hill behind her house each day to feed her birds, with LuLu running alongside.

Although LuLu is a joy, Ruth says that if you want a large dog and you're older, don't get a puppy.

"LuLu is very funny, but is also naughty," she says. A great climber, LuLu has greeted Ruth from her home's rooftop, and can easily jump four feet. "When I first got LuLu, I went right down and bought a baby gate. She looked right at it and jumped right over it. I think it's her Tibetan heritage."

When considering a type of breed, DogTime.com senior editor Leslie Smith suggests thinking about the personality of the dog, rather than basing the decision solely on looks. "Ask yourself: Am I looking for an easy-going type who will walk to the coffee shop with me every day? Or is a homebody, lapdog ideal?"

Many shelters and rescue centers (including ARF) have "seniors for seniors" programs in which older dogs are placed with senior citizens, sometimes for a lower adoption fee, says Smith. "It's an absolutely great way to ensure companionship for people and dogs who are slowing down, or who just aren't as mobile as they used to be."

DogTime.com also has information on its Web site where people can research dog breeds, and take a quiz to see if they are ready for a dog.

"Bringing a dog into your home shouldn't be a snap decision," Smith adds. "It's an adjustment for both species, and humans have a responsibility to ask themselves how they plan to incorporate a pet into their life."

Although many nursing and independent living facilities are seeing the benefits of allowing pets on site, the majority still don't allow pet ownership. The American Animal Hospital Association suggests that before adopting a pet, consider who will care for the animal if you are no longer able.

"My mother and father worried who would take care of their dogs when they could no longer," Glocker says. "My promise to both my mother and father over the years put their minds at ease: I promised to take care of them and their dogs."

For information about ARF's senior adoption program, "Pets for Seniors," or its seniors' Guardian program, you can visit <http://www.arf.net/animal-programs/adoption/pets-for-seniors/index.php> or <http://www.arf.net/animal-programs/guardian-program/>.

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