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Warm and Fuzzy Therapy for Lamorindans

By Cathy Dausman



Front from left, Barbara Brady-Smith and her therapy dog Julie visit with Carmen Turre. Back: Lois Valcalda, Piper, Adele Stack and Carl Raaka. Photos Cathy Dausman

It was cocktail hour at Moraga Royale, and Julie and Piper wore matching vests. The pair joined residents Virginia DeRoia, Lois Valcalda, Adele Stack, Carl Raaka and Carmen Turre for some down time in a common room. "Down," in fact, was the operative word for Piper at least, who may be forgiven a bit of youthful exuberance. After all, Piper is only 18 months old - and she's a miniature Australian labradoodle. Her friend Julie is a 2-year-old golden retriever.

The dogs visit retirement communities, hospitals and schools in their work as therapy pets under the auspices of the Animal Rescue Foundation and the East Bay Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Therapy dogs are used in a variety of capacities, such as when they were used to console victims after the Newtown, Conn., shootings. The dogs, with their chauffeur/owners in tow, simply give and receive unconditional love.

Owners Jan Monteyne and Barbara Brady-Smith both sought purebred dogs from reputable breeders specifically to use as therapy dogs. "It's really neat to 'give back,' and be with your dog," said Monteyne. She and Piper have been making their rounds since last June, but the Lafayette woman has kept dogs for years.

She has taken her charges into the show ring and along the dogsled trail; all have been obedience trained.

Brady-Smith of Moraga is equally dedicated. "I have always had pets," she said. Her current charges include Julie, and Julie's littermate Jack, who still needs to earn his Canine Good Citizen certification.

In addition to senior communities, Brady-Smith and Julie visit troubled children, assist as a hospice grief intervention team, visit colleges to provide stress relief during finals and listen to elementary school children practice reading. Brady-Smith, a professional pet photographer, also volunteers her time to photograph shelter animals ready for adoption.

Both women say Julie is already an "old soul" - as gentle with seniors as she is with 17-month-old June Williams, who delightedly discovered the group while visiting her great-grandmother.

"Every dog has its forte," said Monteyne, although not all are suited as therapy dogs, as Moraga Royale VP/ Director Dianne Wilson can tell you. Her dog Ranger used to visit residents, but Wilson stopped the practice when the dog focused more on protecting its "herd" rather than greeting strangers.

Julie and Piper are certified Canine Good Citizens; each has completed a 10-step American Kennel Club program. East Bay SPCA requires further training. The dogs can't mouth, shouldn't jump, and have been well-socialized. "We sat for hours outside Peet's Coffee asking people to say hello," said Brady-Smith. "And T. J. Maxx," added Monteyne. While Piper's size makes her a good lap dog, Monteyne says Julie is a good "flop dog," meaning the golden retriever size allows her to endure the full force of a child flopping onto her back.

Moraga Royal residents clearly enjoyed the visit. Turre, who over time had a Labrador retriever, a Weimaraner, and a mixed-breed dog, said Piper's and Julie's visit "reminds me of home." Raaka kept a beagle, cocker spaniel and a smaller, whiter dog, like Piper. Both Julie and DeRoia clearly enjoyed bonding over a good ear scratch. "My son's dog loves this, too," DeRoia said.

The end result was a win-win situation - the dogs received plenty of love and attention, and at least a few treats for good behavior, and the seniors walked away with smiles - plus a few dog hairs.

For information on getting a dog Canine Good Citizen certified, visit www.akc.org/events/cgc/program.cfm. East Bay SPCA PALS pet therapy information is available online at <https://www.eastbayspca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=386>.



Therapy dogs Piper and Julie

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