

The Soothing Impact of a Pet

Hospice volunteers bring pets like George to offer comfort

By Bobbie Dodson



George Waterman, a canine companion of a Hospice volunteer
Photo provided

“They recognize me as the lady who brings George to visit. He is the important one,” says Orinda resident Marie Waterman. She is one of the Hospice volunteers who take their dogs to visit Hospice patients. It is just one of the many services this organization offers.

Both the dog and the owner attend training classes. The dog must receive a Canine Good Citizen Certification from the American Kennel Club. The well-known local organization, ARF, provides this training in which the dog must perform accurately such tasks as good interaction with other dogs; navigating an obstacle course; obey the “stay” command while the owner walks away and not moving until the owner tells them to; and giving the dog to a stranger while the owner walks out of the room and the dog obediently stays. The dogs are also scored on how they react to people with walkers, crutches, or to a patient whose oxygen machine makes a strange sound. “George didn’t pass the first time,” Waterman admits, “but came through with flying colors the next time. Mainly the dog must have a good temperament. George loves attention and is friendly with anyone who pays attention to him.

“I was a hospice volunteer making calls on patients who requested it. Engaging them in conversation I sometimes would ask if they had a pet, what was it, its name, and so on. I saw how they often perked up when talking about their pet and thought bringing my pet would really add to my visit,” she says. “I guessed George would be a good candidate. He’s a terrier mix, just a mutt with a loving disposition.”

Waterman stresses it is the dog’s personality not its pedigree that’s important. George was picked up as a stray on the streets of Concord and taken to the Martinez Contra Costa Animal Services where she picked him out to take home. A veterinarian thinks he’s about 7 years old.

Dogs in the program wear the Pet Hug Pack Visiting Animal vest from ARF because that’s where they trained, but they belong to the Hospice program and that is the place from which all assignments come. After being told about the program, if patients say they would like to participate, they are given the choice of a large or small dog, perhaps the breed, and then available volunteers with a dog to match the choice are called to check availability.

“We completely respect their privacy,” Waterman explains. “We are sent records so we know about their illness, but everything is confidential.”

She says it is so rewarding to see the way most patients react to George’s visit. “I ask them if they’d like to pet him, have him on their bed, take him for a walk. Mostly they just want him close so they can hug him. It may be the patient is ‘partially aware’ when we arrive but they can become animated, full of life after some time with George.

“I’ve made up baseball-like cards with George’s picture on them. They so enjoy having them on the wall next to their bed. When I come they may stare blankly when I introduce myself, but then George jumps on their bed to be petted and they are a different person. Family members are delighted you’ve come and ask ‘When are you coming back?’ I typically visit once a week.

“People ask me, ‘Doesn’t it make you sad when a patient you’ve been seeing dies?’ Yes, but mainly I have to remember George and I made their last days happier,” Waterman says.

The goal of the program, which began in 2002 when ARF initiated it, is to provide comfort and something that will make their clientele happy. There is also a Hospice Bereavement program, The Bridge, for children, parents, and caregivers – anyone who has lost a loved one. Waterman comes to this program where George is just there to interact with the participants. She also acts as a mentor to help new volunteers.

It’s been four years since Waterman joined this Hospice program and she finds fulfillment in what she is doing. She modestly explains, “George is the one who does all the work. I’m just the driver.”

For information about the Pet Hug Pack program, visit <http://www.arf.net/people-programs/pet-hug-pack/>. To become a Hospice of the East Bay Patient and Family Volunteer call (925) 887-5678, email volunteers@hospiceeastbay.org or visit www.hospiceeastbay.org.

‘It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play’

Unique production opens at Town Hall Theatre just in time for the holidays

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Harry “Jazzbo” Heywood (Jerry Motta), Jake Laurents (Dan Saski), Sally Applewood (Jenna Stich), Dennis Kirkwood (John Blytt), and Carol Roundtree (Jacqui Herrera)
Photo Stu Selland

Beginning Dec. 6 in Lafayette, you can step back in time and be part of a radio show’s live audience during Town Hall Theatre Company’s production of “It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play.”

It’s the night before Christmas in 1948 at a radio studio in New York City, and a live audience has been invited to the recording of the radio show’s version of “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The studio is decked out for Christmas, and the voice actors are dressed up and ready to go – the actor who will impersonate George Bailey, the actress who will be Mary Bailey, the others who will play two or three different characters – and of course the sound specialist is there, too, ready to create the atmosphere for the listeners who are cuddled around radio sets in their living rooms, close – but not too close – to the fireplace, to listen to Philip Van Doren Stern’s story while sipping their eggnog or hot cocoa.

There are a few major attributes about this show that make it a perfect holiday experience for the whole family. The story itself, of course, is so hopeful and profoundly humanistic, even if it deals with someone

who has decided to end his life. As a radio show, this rendition of the story condenses its meaning to its essence, without taking away any of the emotion. Here, tribute goes to the talented actors. As they read their scripts over the “microphones,” the power of their emotions and the images of their adventures are evoked in the spectators’ minds, just like listening to a story on the radio or on tape underscores the magic of the imagination.

For many families, watching “It’s a Wonderful Life” is a holiday tradition. Religion does not play a role in the play, since it deals with questions of humanity and, as THT director Samantha Fryer puts it, how each individual has an important part to play in this life, and how we all make a difference every day. For her, though, watching the movie was never a tradition; she said she’s never seen the Frank Capra movie with Jimmy Stewart. Fryer nonetheless is familiar with the play version, as she produced and played it several times in the Bay Area, and now for her debut at Town Hall Theatre, she directs the show.

Fryer said it was difficult to pick the perfect cast: More than 100 actors

responded to the audition announcement. “We saw many very talented actors,” says Fryer, “but what I focused on was their interaction and vocal talent.”

This play focuses on the power of that vocal talent. “I think that Jerry (Motta) is the only character who actually talks to himself with different voices,” says Fryer about the actor who plays Uncle Billy, Clarence the angel, and Harry “Jazzbo” Heywood. The actors portray different characters who have a similar vibe in their relationship to George.

The actors’ work to bring the show to maturity was quite involved. During the auditions, Fryer asked them to read entire pages of the script to see how they would impersonate different characters; during rehearsals she would sometimes close her eyes or turn her back to the stage to identify each character only by their distinctive voice. “We also did a very serious work of character development, working on intentions, because the more you deepen your understanding of a character, the more the voice develops,” she states.

All the actors selected for this show are seasoned and know how to evoke powerful emotions. The result is quite stunning, and this reporter challenges any viewer not to shed a tear at one point or another during the show.

Also, special kudos to James Frankle, the sound-effects person on stage who uses delightful live tricks to trigger auditory responses.

“It’s a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play” runs from Dec. 6-20, with previews on Dec. 4 and 5, and matinees on the weekends. For more information, go to townhalltheatre.com or call (925) 283-1557.

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