

A Dose of Puppy Love - Pet Visits Help Patients Heal



Pet therapy volunteer/owners with the **Paws That Refresh** dogs: **Jo Humphrey** and Nick; **Shari Seinfeld** and Zoey; **Ginny Mills** and Molly; **Judy Ransdell** and Chloe; **David Nathanson** and George; **Pam Alfenito** and Wizard; and **Jean Kerr** and Allie.

A visit from a friendly dog can be just the right medicine. Consider the milestone a young patient made after receiving a visit from a pet therapy dog at Northridge Hospital Medical Center. "We witnessed this pediatric rehabilitation patient speak for the first time since his injury when a pet therapy dog visited him," recalls pediatrician, **Hooshang Semnani, MD, Pediatrics Intensive Care Unit** Medical Director. While pets can easily invoke feelings of comfort, joy and playfulness, Dr. Semnani also believes "there is a natural connection between dogs and humans, especially children."

Perhaps that's why **Paws That Refresh**, Northridge Hospital's pet therapy program is such a success. Accompanied by its trained owner-volunteer, a pet therapy dog will visit most of the medical floors, twice daily, delivering unconditional love to the bedside of our patients.

Paws That Refresh launched in 2000 as a small program with just one dog named George and his owner **David Nathanson**. Since then, it has blossomed into a full-fledged service thanks to co-coordinator **Ginny Mills**, who has run pet visitation programs at hospitals for about nine years, five of them at Northridge Hospital. Today, our program has more than nine volunteers and 10 dogs that dispense warm affection to patients five days-a-week.

These dogs are no ordinary pets—the docile and affectionate animals have participated in special training before qualifying as a pet volunteer. All of them are certified therapy dogs by one of two organizations—Therapy Dogs Inc. or the Delta Society, which require dogs to be well-trained, good-natured and enjoy attention.

The volunteer-owners and their dogs must also adhere to strict infection prevention policies through consistent grooming before and after each trip to the hospital. During visits with patients, the dogs may sit or stand next to the bed or in a chair. And upon patient request, the dog can even sit on the bed with them once a separate sheet has been laid down.

Ginny who owns two of the dogs knows that the program provides benefits to patients who may be feeling lonely, depressed or anxious about their hospitalization. "We see patients instantly brighten up when the dog enters their room," she affirms.

"I enjoy seeing the enthusiastic response from our patients. It gives them a glimpse of the outside world," adds **Mary Grim**, Director of Volunteers. "Everyone has such a warm and positive reaction when they see these ambassadors of good cheer coming. The effect is transformational."