

## Canine companions connect with patients at Samaritan hospice



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It can be a hard thing coming to a hospice house, to a center specifically created to care for people nearing the end of their lives.

Patients can be overwhelmed by their illnesses or personal circumstances. Families can be deep in grief — or denial.

At Samaritan Evergreen Hospice House, three small staff members work to give patients and visitors something new to think about, just by

being their furry, tail-wagging selves.

“They open the door to a connection,” said Anne Arquette, whose mixed Lab-border collie, Marfa, has been a therapy dog with Samaritan Evergreen Hospice since 2006. “They’re just a comfort. Something to focus on that’s not your disease.”

Marfa was saved from euthanization at an Arizona animal shelter when an Oregon State University student working at the shelter chose her — the last of a group of 16 dogs — to travel to Heartland Humane Society in Corvallis.

Arquette, a registered nurse and home hospice case manager, adopted her and began bringing her along to hospice care and nursing homes at the request of the people at those centers.

The experience led Arquette to get Marfa certified as Samaritan Evergreen Hospice’s first therapy dog. Now, at age 10, the friendly black dog with the graying muzzle still makes the rounds at Timberwood Court Memory Care Center and at homes with hospice care.

Marfa almost always brings a smile, and some patients will talk about her when they’ve all but stopped communicating, Arquette said. She particularly remembers the woman who’d been silent for some time, then stunned staff members at Timberwood by asking Arquette, “Did you bring your dog today?”

Marfa’s canine coworkers these days are JJ, 3, a golden retriever who belongs to registered nurse Tracy Calhoun, and Phoebe, a 7-month-old Cardigan Welsh corgi who is the youngest Project Canine therapy dog in the state.

JJ and Phoebe both visit with patients at the Samaritan Evergreen Hospice House, at Evergreen Place in southeast Albany. Built in August 2012, the facility provides respite care for families and symptom management for patients in a homelike setting, usually for only a

few days.

The dogs can make a big difference in those few days, however, and both seem to have a knack for it, their owners say.

Phoebe, for instance, has the advantage of being smaller than her doggy sisters and can snuggle with a bedridden patient. On Friday, she rested with Lillian Downs of Albany while Davis' daughter, Judi Forbess, stroked her fur and talked with owner Jody Buktenica about the ins and outs of dog shows.

JJ is careful to introduce herself slowly to new people, poking her head in a patient's room as if to say, "Hi, it's me," Calhoun said.

She also takes it upon herself to stand sentry at the door when a patient has passed away, and quietly leads the way when staffers travel through the hallway with the gurney.

That procedure is called a "walkout," and all staff members line the hallways in silent respect as the patient makes that journey. Calhoun said JJ's escort duty is nothing she taught her.

"She's incredibly intuitive," she said. "She's very good at knowing."

Therapy dogs aren't the same as service dogs and don't necessarily receive the same privileges, such as being able to travel on planes or go into businesses.

Depending on the certification program, training for a therapy dog involves work with both the dog and the handler in various situations, such as with wheelchairs, walkers and sudden noises.

Not everyone is an animal person, the three owners said, so they always check first before making introductions. Some people are allergic, and some just don't get on with dogs.

But Arquette said she's noticing care facilities in general are becoming more open to pets of all kinds, because so many people enjoy the distraction.

Hospice, Buktenica said, "is a reflective time." People who see the therapy dogs often are reminded of their childhood pets, or happy times with their own animals. It's nice, she said, to help people access those memories.

The dogs can help grieving family members when they're not yet ready to talk with a person, Calhoun said. JJ in particular is good at giving "hugs," standing on her back legs to drape her front paws over a person's shoulders.

"It's a little nicer way to remember something," she said.