

Animal Therapy Program Means Helping and Healing for Volunteer

Cancer Battle Provides New Perspective for Dog Handler

It's proven that a pet can be a big help in the healing process. Barb Roberts now knows that all too well.

As a longtime volunteer in the animal assisted therapy (AAT) program at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center, in Rockford, Barb says she has experienced the joy she and her sheltie, Jude, have brought to the hundreds of patients they have visited.

"To be able to share my dogs over the years with people, the patients, the visitors and the staff is truly amazing," says Barb Roberts, an animal assisted therapy volunteer at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "It just - it means a lot to me and even if we do visits for just a few minutes it makes a huge difference and that's why I keep doing it."

Barb saw the program as a way to give back after treatment for breast cancer more than a decade ago. She, and her first therapy dog, Cooper, were part of the inaugural class in 2008. Her commitment took on an added perspective when the breast cancer returned a year ago.

After taking time off for treatment, Barb and Jude jumped right back in, because Barb knows what it means for patients. It also proved to be very therapeutic for her.

"When you've gone through something like this it makes you stop and think there's a lot of people out there that have a lot of issues and a lot of things going on," says Roberts. "So, it tends to make you compassionate and, um, understanding of what some people might be going through. So, you want to be able to give them a little bit of - just a moment in their day - to brighten their day and give them something to look forward to when the dogs come to visit them."

Approaching its tenth year, demand for therapy dog visits at OSF Saint Anthony grows with each year. That's why the program is always seeking new volunteers. However, therapy dog coordinator Theresa Geraci says AAT is not for every dog.

"They need to have a dog that does have obedience training," says Theresa Geraci, therapy dog coordinator at OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "That, you know, you're in a hospital, you're in an acute setting and your dog does have to be able to behave. It has to sit up on command, lay down on command, walk next to you on a loose lead - it has to like being touched and petted by strangers."

Barb's cancer is in remission and she plans to be part of the AAT program for many years to come. In fact, she already has a seven month old puppy, named Jaxon, now going through obedience training.

Auditions for new therapy dogs and handlers at OSF Saint Anthony are scheduled for February 17. To learn more, go to www.osfsaintanthony.org or call 815-395-5064.

Similar programs are at OSF HealthCare Saint Francis Medical Center in Peoria, OSF HealthCare St. Joseph Medical Center in Bloomington and OSF HealthCare St. Mary's Medical Center in Galesburg.