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Loyal pets rising to the occasion

By Paula King
STAFF WRITER

WHEN DARLENE Rourke's yellow Labrador visits the Orinda Convalescent Hospital, he is greeted with dog treats and lots of attention. The senior citizens like to touch his soft coat and Kody likes to lick their faces.

"If just one person is glad you are there, it makes it worth it," Rourke said. "This gives them some kind of contact that they don't normally get."



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The Lafayette resident's twice monthly trips are part of the Visiting Animal Program that was established by Tony LaRussa's Animal Rescue Foundation last September. Upon requests from the county's senior therapeutic facilities, volunteers bring in temperament-qualified dogs and cats for an hour of casual interaction and play time.

In Lamorinda, regular visits are made to the Lafayette Convalescent Hospital, Aegis of Moraga, Moraga Royale and the one in Orinda.

"We bring animal interaction to people who want to experience what they may have lost: the loving touch or look from a pet which they may no longer have at home due to loss of their independence," said the foundation's chief programs officer Beth Brannock.

Brannock says the health benefits of companion animal interaction are numerous. They include lowering blood pressure, reducing anxiety and generally improving physical and mental health.

Research studies also indicate that cats or dogs can open up individuals who are usually unresponsive in miraculous ways. This has been attributed to the unconditional love that pets give at hospital rehabilitation programs, physical and occupational therapy sessions, nursing homes, mental health care facilities and hospice programs through animal assisted therapy organizations.

These healing pets have helped the disabled, handicapped, emotionally troubled and terminally ill. Pet

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therapy has become an accepted way to lift the spirits of those who may be prone to depression and loneliness.

Animal companionship is not limited to cats and dogs. As the manager of Feathered Follies in Lafayette, Jeanni Landry brings cockatiels and cockatoos into the Lafayette hospital to meet its residents.

Hospital residents are lucky enough to have an aviary with canaries. Some like to watch the birds in flight. They also ask Landry questions about the exotic birds that she brings into their home.

"They have a lot of enjoyment watching the birds and listening to them chatter," she said. "They are really nice people. They are forgotten sometimes. I think it's great therapy."

This form of alternative therapy helps the elderly and also at-risk youth. Emotionally disturbed and inner-city kids from foster care organizations, homeless shelters and county funded programs care for goats, ponies and chickens at Deer Hill Ranch of Lafayette.

"The therapy is that if they treat the animals respectfully then the animal will respond. If you do that with animals, you can do that with people," said executive director Hunter Holding, Jr. "This is the way to establish a trusting relationship."

Many of the inner-city kids have never been on a farm or tended to farm animals. Holding said the impulse is to not be mindful or respectful, but those traits are gained through animal interaction.

These semi-monthly visits are for children who have been the victims of abuse, neglect or trauma. Another program is in the works for small groups of children who are non-verbal.

Just in the past six months, the ranch has hosted 37 at-risk, low-income or homeless kids through its farm interaction/humane education programs. They are divided into small groups according to age and led by staff with training in child development, child abuse, group dynamics and experiential learning.

"With the animals, they are shown that calmness and trusting is reciprocated," he said. "The whole group gets to understand this concept."

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