

Should Your Therapist Be a Dog?

According to therapy dog handler Patricia (Pat) Wheeler '62, '65W (Mas), some dogs are able to help people in ways many humans can't.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

When my husband died in 2001, I got a dog. I named him Lawrence—Lawrence the Livermore Lab. I'd been a volunteer at the VA Medical Center in Livermore for years and I'd seen therapy dogs working. I took Lawrence to basic obedience training, and I just thought he was a born therapy dog. The following year, I adopted a black Lab mix, Albert, who also became a therapy dog. Lawrence and Albert both died in this past year. I still have Maddie, whom I adopted in 2013, and she, too, is a registered therapy dog.

Therapy dogs must have the right temperament for what can be challenging work. To have a dog registered as a therapy dog, the handler and dog must be reviewed by a recognized therapy dog organization before starting work as a therapy dog team. I've gone all sorts of places with my dogs, all of whom were registered with Therapy Dogs Inc., which is a national group headquartered in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I've gone to a shelter for homeless and battered women and children, a center for men with mental health and drug-related problems, nursing homes, other senior care facilities, the VA, schools for adults with developmental disabilities, K-12 schools, and even colleges and

graduate schools. Recently I spoke to clinical nursing classes about how therapy dogs can help them serve their patients better.

Therapy dogs are not service dogs. Service dogs go through a year of basic training and then go to a special facility for intensive training on how to do things like pick up items off the floor, open refrigerators, open doors, and turn out lights. They're also assigned to one individual.

Therapy dogs can do more than just cuddle up to you and comfort you. I decided to write my book when Lawrence got a man who hadn't left his room in years to get up and walk out. The staff at a facility had been trying for years to get the man to walk out of his room, and he wouldn't do it. And Lawrence came to visit him one day. He said to Lawrence, "The doctor said if I don't start to walk every day, I'm going to die." And the minute Lawrence heard the word "walk," he was wiggling all over the place. When you've got some dog sitting there with loving eyes watching you, you do things. You get up and walk. You do your physical therapy. Sometimes it's very hard for the therapists alone to get patients to do things. The staff was absolutely stunned when they saw the man coming down the hallway with Lawrence.

Therapy dogs also work in schools and libraries. Children enjoy reading to a therapy dog. Even if the dog seems to be sleeping, it's probably listening. And children will try words and select books they might not have otherwise. Their interest in reading grows, and their self-esteem improves.

Patricia Wager Wheeler '62, '65W (Mas)

Home: Livermore, California

Occupation: Retired researcher, Educational Testing Service; current therapy dog handler, and author of *Successful Tails: The Wonders of Therapy Dogs* (AuthorHouse).

On Rochester: "I live in California, and we're experiencing a drought. But I love seeing the dandelion in my front yard. I leave it there. It reminds me of Rochester."



How do they do it? I really don't know. I'd be rich if I did. Part of it is their unconditional acceptance of people. They love us for who we are. And you know a dog is listening to you, because they perk their ears up and they look at you with an interested expression on their face. Are we that attentive when somebody's talking to us? I don't know. Some people are playing with their cell phone or doing something else. You wonder. 🐾