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Photos by Andrew P. Blackburn/New Era

Prancing pooches strut their stuff for the residents of Brethren Village in a KPETS canine parade.

OK pets, let's help

These pooches have the perfect canine charisma to soothe and comfort

By **SUSAN JURGELSKI**
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WHEN BRETHREN VILLAGE Retirement Community resident Jean Miller met her new friend Toby at the Bow Wow Luau, she gave him the best seat in the house.

Her lap.

Toby, a Yorkshire terrier and one of the Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services (KPETS) therapy dogs, spent much of a recent sunbaked Sunday afternoon lounging with Miller in her wheelchair. Miller joined other residents and dog-lovers at the retirement community's pavilion for the KPETS annual fund-raising event, which included everything from a Hawaiian-themed canine costume contest to a dog/owner dance demonstration.

Miller and Toby, owned by Connie McCarthy, led the Hula Loop, which teamed Brethren Village residents and bedecked dogs and their owners in a short walk around the pavilion.

Some dogs boasted sunglasses balanced precariously on their snouts. Other pups wore leis around their necks. A few lucky pooches sported grass skirts.

The event was an opportunity for the year-old nonprofit KPETS to do what it does best: share canine charisma with appreciative community members.

"What I like about KPETS is that we're not just pet therapy," says KPETS volunteer Laura Whitman, whose beagles Daisy and Reni are certified therapy dogs. "We go out into the community to provide programs that facilitate the animal/human bond, in addition to recruiting more pet-therapy teams.

"At this point, the demand from the facilities that would like

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Natasha, an American staghound, works with the KPETS group. "There are so many areas of therapy work," says KPETS founder Karen Gerth.

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regular visits exceeds the supply teams.”

On Sunday, Oct. 10, KPETS volunteers will participate in a one-day course in canine disaster-relief services. The course, which will be held 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Brethren Village, is open to all canine handlers and other interested individuals.

Dogs and owners trained in disaster relief can provide aid during weather-related disasters such as the recent tornado in Campbelltown, says Whitman. Dogs were also an integral part of 9/11 rescue efforts.

“There are so many areas of therapy work,” says KPETS founder Karen Gerth, who began pet-therapy work six years ago and now volunteers with her golden retriever, Sammy. “Through KPETS, I wanted to establish a local connection to help people get started. I have seen where this can bring so much benefit to people.”

* * *

Sammy doesn't need words to comfort people.

With just a tail wag or toothy grin, he can turn a frown into a smile and frustration into hope.

When Sammy and Gerth visit people undergoing occupational and physical therapy, Sammy can make a patient's day.

“He's awesome,” says Gerth.

“One lady who was in her last day of physical therapy at the hospital said the day Sammy was there was the best day she had had in the hospital.”

Gerth also remembers Sammy's interaction with a man who had had a stroke.

“He was a huge guy with long dreadlocks, and he wore a ‘What would Jesus do’ bracelet,” says Gerth. “When he was taking a break from his therapy, he put his hand on Sammy and said, ‘Sammy, you are just the best.’ This man was touched by this dog. And he was someone you might not have first thought would be affected that way.”

Gerth says Sammy motivates people to stay even if they don't like dogs. “He helps people relax,” she says.

Gerth first started a small dog-therapy group through her church but eventually saw the need to expand her vision through KPETS.

“A dog doing therapy work can only last about an hour, no more than twice a week, so you have to be careful not to burn your dog out,” she says.

“Hopefully, (KPETS) can be a coordination point of how people can get certified and then go in whatever direction they want to go,” she says.

Right now, KPETS has about 100 on its mailing list and 25 active volunteers.

Some dog/owner teams volunteer at Hospice of Lancaster County, some go to nursing homes and some work with children to

encourage reading.

“We are starting to work with special-needs children at a church to help them relax and keep focused on the Sunday school class,” says Gerth.

Dog/owner pet-therapy certification through KPETS generally requires an orientation followed by two community visits, during which the teams are evaluated.

“After the dog is qualified, we set the teams up at their convenience within six months,” says Gerth.

KPETS has a dog-therapy certification orientation scheduled for Sept. 24, which is already filled, and another on Oct. 22.

Certified KPETS volunteers have a full fall slate of community events in which to bone up on their therapy skills.

In September, volunteers will participate in the United Way Day of Caring at Conestoga View and the Neffsville Vet Clinic Pet Days/Pet Wash. Other events include Responsible Pet Ownership Day at the Lebanon Expo Center and the Amos Herr Park Community Days.

Volunteers look forward to gathering at various events, says Whitman.

“It's a great way for dog people to get together, have fun with their dogs and also show the community that well-behaved dogs are possible.”

Luckily for Miller, so are lap-loving dogs.

For more information, go to www.kpets.org or call 333-KPET.

