

# The Therapy Dog Will See You Now

Four-footed friends offer help to many

By Maureen Leader

**W**yatt Bailey is an adorable little boy who loves to play with Sam, a 7-year-old golden retriever.

"C'mere, Sammy. C'mere." Wyatt takes Sam through an obstacle course and encourages Sam to walk with him. Then Wyatt runs a dog treat through a maze drawn on a table. He counts the turns the dog treat makes. At the end of the maze, Sam gets the treat.

Then Wyatt makes a card for Sam. He stamps out each letter: "S," "A," "M." Then, "Love, Wyatt."

It seems like just a little boy playing with a dog, but there is so much more going on here. Wyatt has an autism spectrum disorder, a neurological condition that can affect a child's social and communication skills. He plays with Sam at Schreiber Pediatric Rehab Center. The playtime is part of Wyatt's therapy with occupational therapist Bethanie Steese. And Sam is a therapist of sorts, too.

While Wyatt believes he is playing with and training the golden retriever, Sam motivates and helps Wyatt to learn. Sam is part of KPETS, Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services, a nonprofit group that Sam's owner, Karen Gerth, started in 2003. Gerth says that though she "stumbled" into pet therapy, it is now her passion. "This is what God put me on this earth to do," she says.

KPETS brings registered pet owners and their pets to area health-related facilities to aid in therapy and rehabilitation or even just to break up the day and bring a smile. It has more than 150 volunteer teams serving more than 120 facilities in eight counties in south central Pennsylvania and northern Maryland, including Lancaster General Hospital, Lancaster Rehabilitation Hospital, and Hershey Medical Center. The organization screens and trains owners and their pets before sending them out to special needs programs, nursing homes, hospices, schools, and libraries, where their services are provided for free.

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Wyatt's mother, Julie Bailey, has seen the benefits of her son's relationship with Sam. "Wyatt is doing really well. Learning is never hard with Sam. It's a very easy friendship," she said. "It's seamless."

Wyatt has learned to do up to five tasks in a sequence. Before working with Sam, he couldn't perform two. His fine motor skills have improved, and just by practicing with Sam, he's learned to walk beside his mother instead of running away from her.

The benefits of KPETS visits at other facilities are also obvious, says Gerth. The visits to juvenile detention centers prove to be a



Wyatt Bailey and his therapy dog friend Sam at the Schreiber Pediatric Rehab Center with occupational therapist Bethanie Steese.

huge motivator for the teens. Gerth explains, "The kids have to behave in order to work with the dogs."

KPETS visits to libraries and schools help children read. A child will readily read out loud to a dog. Gerth says, "A dog won't laugh at you if you mispronounce a word. It's nonjudgmental." And after a dog visit, nursing home residents talk about it for days.

KPETS is looking for more volunteers. Dogs need to be easy-going and enjoy a lot of touching. There's plenty in it for owners, too. Gerth says, "You get to spend time with your pet, he gets the attention he loves, and we serve those in need in our communities. What could be better than that?" **BHL**

**FYI:** Visit [www.kpets.org](http://www.kpets.org) or call (888) 68-KPETS.