

The Rapid Rise of Pet Therapy

A Lancaster-based organization is using trained dogs to make a difference where conventional medicine can't.

by Karen Gerth
Community contributor

The therapist pulled Emily's mother aside after a speech therapy session, awestruck. "This is amazing," she said. "She spoke to me for the first time. And in three full sentences!" The breakthrough — not a miracle, maybe, but something close — was made possible by an unexpected visitor the young patient had spotted walking on all fours down the hallway of Schreiber Pediatric.

Chester, a KPETS (Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services) therapy dog, and his handler, Diane, were on their way to the physical therapy gym when Emily saw the animal scuttle by. "There goes a dog!" the young girl excitedly blurted out. Her therapist was astonished. Over the course of many previous speech therapy sessions, she had never spoken as much as a word. And now this. Emily went on: "Can I pet him?" Without hesitation, her therapist approved. After scurrying down the hall to catch up, the child looked up at Chester's handler and spoke again: "What's his name?"

Emily, the girl who didn't speak, had practically delivered a soliloquy before her session even began.

What is KPETS?

KPETS, based in Lancaster County, recruits, trains, assesses and registers pet therapy teams. The organization also helps coordinate volunteers with the needs in their communities. KPETS was founded in 2003 and now, with more than 350 registered volunteers serving Lancaster and surrounding counties, it provides more than 80,000 pet therapy visiting hours each year.

The volunteers visit health care and personal care facilities, hospices, hospitals, schools, libraries, and group and private homes. They serve the elderly, special needs children



Buddy Bear steals a kiss while acting as a reading buddy for a young girl. Therapy dogs are often used to make reading more fun for kids.
Photo courtesy of Karen Gerth



A physical therapist and motivational therapy dog help Kayla practice walking.
Photo courtesy of Karen Gerth

and adults, at-risk teens — whoever stands to benefit from pet therapy.

Emily's story is common at KPETS. Her's is just one of many cases where seemingly impossible progress was made manifest by simple interaction between a person and a pet.

The statistics are overwhelming. Owning pets increases heart attack survival rate, decreases cardiovascular risk factors and helps people deal with chronic pain.

Take the 4-year-old girl who had barely begun walking before she met Sammy, one of the group's therapy dogs. "That was like running a marathon for her. That was incredible," her therapist said after watching the two play.

Or the mute WWII veteran who bonded with the KPETS dog who visited him regularly. Or the patient who, the day he



With the aid of KPETS therapy dog Sammy, a young girl works on her balance. Sammy, meanwhile, marches in lockstep.

Photo courtesy of Karen Gerth

passed away, had his wife run out and buy treats for his KPETS dog Reni because he knew she was scheduled to come by that night.

Or the case of a young girl named Natalie.

Natalie was an adopted child from China who was deprived of essential nurturing, and human contact, as an infant. By the time she made it to the states, she was still having trouble touching, and being touched by, other people. The girl wouldn't hug her mother. So KPETS arranged for her to meet Podley, a three-legged therapy dog. During their first visit, Natalie waited for story time, seated on an oversized beanbag mat. Podley waited too, draped across her little lap. Natalie was nervous at first, but the therapist comforted her, assured her it was OK, and showed the girl how the dog liked his ears and neck rubbed. Natalie gave it a try. Whenever his new friend grew hesitant, whenever the petting slowed, Podley leaned back and looked up into her eyes as if to say "please don't stop."

And Natalie, the girl who couldn't hug her mother, kept right on going.

The science of pet therapy

A KPETS therapy dog can have an effect on many people and ailments, opening doors a human therapist or visitor cannot. Pet therapy clients tend to relax and, for a while at least, let

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5 SURPRISING PET BENEFITS

- **If you heart a pet**, it might help your heart. Multiple studies have demonstrated that pet ownership improves a host of heart health measures.
- **They make great partners** for the aging. Alzheimer's patients have been shown to have fewer outbursts if there is an animal in the house.
- **Some dogs can sniff** out illness. A 2011 study published in the European Respiratory Journal found that "sniffer" dogs can identify early stage lung cancer at a 71 percent rate based just on breath samples.
- **Pets can improve stress** management. Pet adoption is associated with lower blood pressure.
- **Rover might land you** a date. According to WebMD, pets can be a great icebreaker for those who are shy and lvelorn. "Sometimes the conversation stays at the 'dog level,' sometimes it becomes a real social interchange," Nadine Kaslow, a behavioral science professor at Emory University, told the website.

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go of their problems. Patients can forget about pain while playing fetch or walking with a therapy dog — allowing them to reach and surpass rehab goals more easily, often times without realizing the progress they've made.

The animals can be used to advance educational goals as well. In schools, children are encouraged to read to the dogs — making what can be a difficult exercise fun. One little girl who had hated class was disappointed to learn there was no school the following Friday because of a holiday. It turned out there was a “read to the dog” day she didn't want to miss.

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The science is an enthusiastic supporter of the KPETS project. Research and studies, including Marty Becker's book, “The Healing Power of Pets,” have shown that interactions with pets can make people more social, more active and even healthier. The statistics are overwhelming. There's evidence that owning pets increases heart attack survival rate, decreases cardiovascular risk factors and helps people deal with chronic pain. It's believed that even a visit from a pet can reduce blood pressure and stress hormones and lower heart rate. Research also suggests pets can prevent, detect and, in some cases, even treat a variety of illnesses ranging from arthritis and asthma to Alzheimer's disease and depression.

The benefits are remarkable.

My story, our story

My name is Karen Gerth and I'm the cofounder of KPETS.

This organization has been a win-win-win situation for me since our first therapy visit. Involvement in pet therapy gave me a chance to spend more time with my pet, it gave my pet the attention he lived for, and I got to serve my the community at

Nothing to Sneeze At

19

The percentage of infants in homes with pets who develop allergies. The allergy rate for babies without pets? 33 percent.



Even simple play with an animal can have health benefits. Stretching to reach and pet the dog is another form of physical therapy.

Photo courtesy of Karen Gerth

the same time. I feel like, in pet therapy, I've found my calling. It took a half century, but I finally found it.

This year, however, has been a bittersweet year. It marks the 10 year anniversary of KPETS, but it's also the year that I lost my cofounder.

Sammy, my dog, died in August.

Sammy was by my side, or, rather, by my feet, for hours and hours on end as I filed all the organization's start-up paperwork. He was my partner for all the initial sessions at the many places KPETS tried to make a difference. Institutions such as Schreiber Pediatric and Lancaster Rehabilitation Hospital were introduced to the benefits of pet therapy by Sammy.

Therapy is not a natural activity for dogs, like agility or flyball or nose work. We are asking the dogs to perform as we do in “human culture.” It is not natural for them to approach another dog and sit. They want to sniff and figure things out the way they are done in “canine culture”. For some dogs, it's a perfect fit, while others may take a little bit of training to get there. It costs money to get them there. That's why, in Sammy's memory, we've created The Sammy's Legacy Fund to ensure KPETS' sustainability, and to allow us to continue to provide free pet therapy for those who need it.

How we grow

There are many ways to get involved, of course, one of



Volunteering With KPETS

The organization is always looking for loving pets, and owners, to join in. Here's how to get involved.

The KPETS animals do a great deal of impressive work. From helping young girls like Emily speak, to getting shy kids like Natalie to open up, all the way to aiding health care providers in the treatment of those with chronic illnesses — they're clearly well-trained animals.

But here's the thing: to become part of the KPETS team, an animal doesn't need any extraordinary abilities or skills. Just a kind disposition and an owner who's willing to help out. Below are the four steps Lancaster area pets (and their owners) can take to get involved with the program. Go to kpets.org to learn more.

- **A three-hour orientation** for the human half of the team.
- **An assessment workshop** with the dog. KPETS experts will spend time with the animal in a controlled environment to see how he/she handles obedience commands, petting from strangers, greeting other dogs, rough petting, loud noises, wheelchairs and variables as particular as different floor covers.
- **After passing the** initial assessment, the team, man and dog, is taken for two on-site visits for some on-the-job training. All pets are evaluated in an actual therapy visit setting before being allowed to represent KPETS.
- **Pay the registration fee.** This \$35 charge covers the liability insurance KPETS must carry for its registered teams..

Other ways to support the group

Because not everyone has the time, or the requisite pet, to become a direct KPETS volunteer, the group has carved out a handful of other ways for people sympathetic to the cause to get involved. More information is available at kpets.org.

- **Become a resource** sponsor. Supporters can pick a specific resource or utility KPETS uses (internet, rent, phone, etc.) and pay for it for a specific month or year.
 - **Make a direct gift** to KPETS through its PawPrints program.
 - **Shop on Amazon.** KPETS is a partner in the Amazon Associates program, so any time a shopper makes a purchase on the website using the KPETS link, the organization gets a percentage back.
 - **Buy an item** on its wish list. KPETS maintains a page on its website where it keeps a registry of items it needs.
- Tom Sunnergren

which is pet owners volunteering with their dogs. The process of becoming a KPETS therapy team is surprisingly simple. Step one is a three hour orientation for the human half of the team. This is followed by an assessment workshop for the animal. In a controlled environment, KPETS personnel will test how the dog handles obedience commands, petting from strangers, greetings from other dogs, rough petting, loud noises, wheelchairs and other variables they may encounter in the field. The final step is a pair of on-site visits where animal trainers evaluate the prospective KPETS dog in an actual therapy setting.

This is the way this group has grown. And grow it has. There is a KPETS team sharing their pet with someone, somewhere, each and every day of the calendar year. This organization is committed to continuing to provide its services to anyone who may benefit — at no cost to the organizations or individuals in need.

For more information on Keystone Pet Enhanced Therapy Services, or to learn more about The Sammy's Legacy Fund, call the group at 888-685-7387 or visit it online at kpets.org.

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THINK

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