

A Healthy Dose of Lab

by Jo Eager

Max has stories to tell. Like the time he took a romp through juvenile hall and met up with a bunch of teenagers in need of hope. His owner, Pamela Howe, says many times Max brought comfort and normalcy to a world that had torn apart the lives of these youngsters. "Quite often, they would confide in him that they still had dreams and ambitions," Howe said.

Zelda (not her real name) spent several months in a convalescent home, never talking to anyone – not one word – until Max stopped by for a visit one afternoon. Zelda petted Max and began to tell him and Howe about the dog she had when she was a young girl. The staff at the convalescent home watched and listened

Pamela Howe and Max.



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Chester loves bringing smiles to those who need it most.

in amazement. "Afterwards, a nurse looking really shocked told me that they had never heard that particular patient speak," said Howe.

Max is a Labrador mix who has proven time and again that pets can heal. Studies on the effects of pets in nursing homes found residents smiling more and becoming more alert than residents who were not in contact with animals. Pets are known to aid the terminally ill, the elderly, psychologically challenged, juvenile offenders, and even crack babies. Disabled and handicapped children and adults seem to respond especially well to animals.

Max demonstrated his healing capabilities during weekly visits that took him to convalescent homes, teen lockups (both psychological and juvenile crime), youth homes for abused and neglected children, and in-home hospice. He and Howe spent an afternoon each week visiting different institutions. Howe said she witnessed numerous miracles but always felt

she gained much more than she gave.

At a teen psychological facility, Howe said there was a girl who was in full body restraints to protect her from herself. "She was shy around the animals, except Max," said Howe. "She always wanted to spend time with him and even ventured to give him a biscuit on a couple of occasions."

The therapeutic value of pets exists in homes in our everyday lives. Lucy is in her 60s and is concerned that she will outlive her dog, 10-year-old Freddie. She said all the things you hear about the value of a pet to older people are true. "With a dog, you're never without love," she said. "He's the light of my life. I got him three years after my husband died, when the empty house got to me and I couldn't stand it any longer," she said. Now Lucy never has to come home to an empty house – there's always a face in the window waiting for her. "No matter how gloomy I might feel, if I can reach out and touch that sleek body, everything is okay. If I'm restless at night and get up to go to the kitchen or the living room, within a few seconds there is a patter-patter from the room where he sleeps and he's right there with me."

Researchers found that elderly

people who own pets have fewer visits to doctors than those without pets. Studies show an increased recovery rate in hospitalized, chronically ill patients and the elderly when animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities are used.

Michael Clelland saw firsthand the results of using animals in therapy with his father-in-law. The man had owned a black Lab before he went to the rest home where he spent his last few years. Once a week, animals visited the home.

"He loved it," said Clelland. "He would brighten up. The pooch would get up in the bed with him. He couldn't walk because of arthritic knees. It was just unbelievable how he would perk up. He looked forward to that."

Regardless of what you're doing, it seems that just having your dog present can make a difference in heart rate. Scientists attribute the therapeutic effects of pets to the non-judgmental, accepting nature of animals. Interaction is non-threatening and uncomplicated, which is not always the case with people.

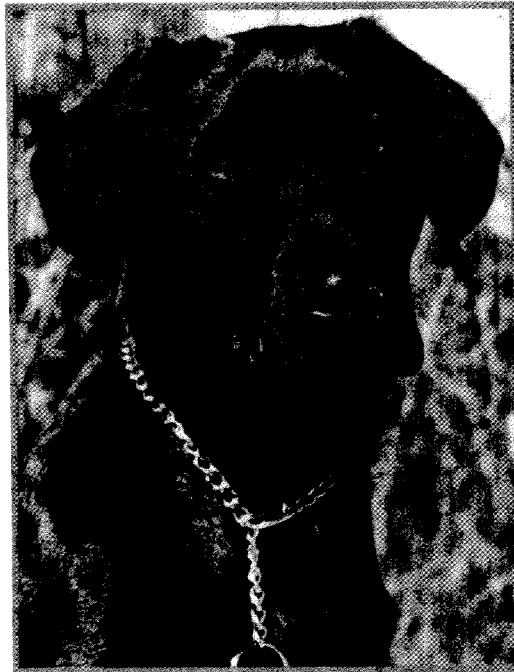
Whether to give a sense of purpose, lift spirits, or be a listening ear, pet therapy is a win/win situation. As Max's owner puts it: "There are those moments when you know that somebody's life is better, just because you and their animal friend showed up – when you know that your life, and theirs, will never be the same. It makes me understand just how lucky I am to be able to give."

Robin Cohen, who heads the Pet Encounter Therapy (PET) at Helen Woodward Animal Center in San Diego County, says it's magical what

animals do. She mentioned touch as one of the ways animals brighten lives. "Often people aren't touched a lot, and they can do that with animals. Everyone needs touch," she said, pointing out cases of abused children where touching was a problem, or other patients who receive a minimal amount of touch, only what they receive from the nurses. Animals provide a non-threatening outlet for physical contact.

PET currently has three Labradors in the program. They love children and tend to gravitate toward therapy work that involves more action. Cohen said they're food-motivated, making them easy to train, which allows the kids to do some tricks with them. The children give a verbal cue to the Lab while the owner gives a visual cue to get the dog to do a trick. Cohen said it's great for the kids – it gives them not only a chance to be involved but

to feel listened to. "The dog



It was Friday afternoon, not unlike any other Friday. Jet and I were out for our afternoon stroll when we came across our neighbor who operates a daycare at her home. One of the children she cares for ("Morgan") is a young, withdrawn girl who had learned through her parents' divorce not to trust anymore. Jet and Morgan had played before, building a bond and making a strong impression on the young girl. Morgan and Jet played – Jet being her usual well-tempered and obedient self, especially for being only one and a half years old. When Morgan's Mom came to pick her up, Morgan asked if she could walk Jet to my house. Her Mom said it was alright, and Morgan – with Jet in tow – headed down the lane. When they reached the house, Morgan put her arms around Jet's neck and kissed her lightly on the head. Then, giving her a big hug, she whispered, "I love you, Jet."

At that moment, I realized that all the time and effort I had put into Jet had been worth it one-hundred times over. She had taught a young girl to trust again, which was the best therapy Morgan could ever have gotten. I hope to get Jet certified as a therapy dog in the near future so she can visit hospitals and nursing homes, to inspire the lives of many other human beings. – Kim Chappell, Cambridge, New York

... had to go through five of them to get there. He's been able to forgive what happened to him in the hands of humans and still give all that wonderful love."

There's not a lot that fazes a Lab, in any environment. Cohen said they tend to take awhile to mature into pet therapy, being very high-spirited in the beginning; but once they mature, it's like they were meant to do therapy work. They're able to work in many surroundings and are inclined to have long careers.

Volunteers make the program work. Along with one full- and two part-time staff members, PET has 65 volunteers. "There's a real difference when people *want* to be there versus being paid," Cohen said. "Kids often understand that these volunteers just want to be there. They all bring different life experience – some are nurses and doctors. It also gives these kids great role models."

Cohen said dogs involved in Helen

Woodward's PET program are required to get a health screening with all the shots they need, and behavior screening, which includes passing the K-9 Good Citizen test. Most programs have their own test that mimics what happens in a visitation. Programs don't look for perfection but rather a well-trained dog that focuses first on people and who wants to be there. Some dogs are more interested in other dogs than the person they're visiting.


In Helen Woodward Animal Center's temperament test, the dog must be reliable in therapy work, able to adapt to all environments, and adjust to situations. The animal can't be shy, nervous, or aggressive, and must allow numerous people to touch it.

In addition to the emotional support that therapy pets such as Max provide, animals also aid in social interaction and cooperation among patients and can help motivate them to help themselves. It's a wonderful method

of alternative health, providing a natural way to healing.

Howe found the Lab personality works well in pet therapy. "Labs are typically good-natured, smart, have a calm demeanor, and they're eager to please. They really do have the perfect combination of characteristics for pet therapy work," she said.

One day after Max visited a woman, he and Howe started to walk away when it was discovered that the lady's wheelchair had been on Max's tail the entire time. He never complained.

Next time you've had a rough day and need to relax, just head home and pet your Lab. Man's best friend can give you a sense of well-being, in addition to lowering blood pressure, stabilizing the heart rate, and decreasing stress. Reducing stress can help the digestive and cardiovascular systems stay healthy and can improve immune function. And that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the therapeutic value of Labs. 



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