

LEO'S STORY: A THERAPY DOG

"Interact with one cold nose, four paws and a wagging tail once a week"

Imagine a single physical therapy prescription that treated malaise, depression, melancholy and loneliness. "Interact with one cold nose, four paws and a wagging tail once a week." Even the most needy of cases would look forward to their weekly treatment by a non-judgmental friend. A few JSSA Hospice and Transitions patients know this to be true, thanks to Leo, a standard poodle.

Two afternoons each week, Leo and I visit JSSA Hospice and Transitions patients in assisted-living facilities in Potomac and Bethesda. Leo has been a certified therapy dog for years. He's placid, affable and grew up with five human siblings and an authoritarian canine sister, all of whom helped him perfect the art of putting others at ease. Like all therapy dogs, Leo has an innate sense of knowing when someone needs comfort. He has visited people at many nursing homes and hospitals but when he started regular visits to his 93-year old "grandmother" in the Hebrew Home in January 2012, he found his true calling.

He brought excitement, entertainment and a change of pace to many patients otherwise languishing. For some suffering from dementia, he brought them back to reality of the present day, or helped them return to the fondest memories of their childhood pet. Until the day before my mother-in-law died, he was a welcome companion next to her wheelchair or sharing her bed. When Leo was there, she knew her family was there and that meant we cared and it gave her some peace.

Her passing created a void in Leo's routine and that's when we decided to volunteer with JSSA Hospice and Transitions. Our visits give people a reason to be presentable. One lady told me, "I put lipstick on today knowing I was going to see you and Leo!"

Leo is somewhat of a celebrity in some assisted living facilities. Maybe it's because he is different from every-

one else who enters the building – family members and friends, medical personnel and employees. He's there because he wants to be, not because he has to be. He gets a warm greeting from everyone. Many residents want to spend time with him, but our JSSA Hospice and Transitions friends know that we're there to see them.

On Mondays, we visit an older gentleman with severe dementia. Our conversations are limited, and some-

times he doesn't speak much at all but he definitely enjoys his time with Leo. He is usually sitting on a couch and Leo routinely climbs up and snuggles with him, resting his head on the gentleman's lap. Almost instantly, the man relaxes and smiles as he pets Leo from nose to tail. Sometimes they both doze off, content in each other's company.

Recently, the gentleman's daughter called Carrie Myatt, from JSSA Hospice and Transition's volunteer program, because she was concerned about her father's well-being. "He never smiles anymore," she said. When Carrie expressed the daughter's concerns to me, I told her to tell his daughter that "he always smiles on Mondays."

Our Thursday visits are lively and full of conversation. Carol is a lovely woman and a true dog lover, and she and Leo bonded on our first visit. To her delight, she and Leo even share the same birthday! Although Leo was our initial ice breaker, he now dozes off while Carol and I chat about books we've read, movies, our families and life in general. Through our visits we've become friends.

Carol always gives Leo a special treat, and he knows in which dresser drawer they are kept. His photo is proudly displayed on that same dresser, right next to one of Evan, her 7-year old grandson. "See how high he ranks!" she says. At the end of each visit, Carol beams with pride as she walks us to the elevator, introducing Leo to friends along the way.



The noticeable benefits of animal-assisted therapy are known. It helps to lower blood pressure, have a calming effect and lift spirits for those who are depressed or feeling isolated and even decreases perception of pain. But beyond that, it provides the patient with a much-needed opportunity to give affection as well as receive it. This reciprocity – rare among medical therapies – makes animal-assisted therapy so unique and valuable.

I know firsthand that it works. Our visits may be a treat for JSSA Hospice and Transitions patients, but Leo and I always leave with a deep sense of gratification that comes with lending a hand – or paw – to people who need it most.

ABOUT JSSA HOSPICE AND TRANSITIONS

JSSA Hospice serves people of all religious backgrounds and is the hospice in the community to turn to for exceptional end-of-life care that supports dignity and comfort for individuals, provides peace of mind to families and honors all cultural traditions and customs. Learn more: www.jssa-hospice.org. JSSA's Transitions is a social support program designed to help individuals and their families living with life-threatening illness. A Transitions coordinator visits once or twice a month and provides information about community resources, help with understanding care options and choices. Learn more: <https://www.jssa.org/service/homecare/transitions-care-life-limiting-illness/>

- Marlene Schooler, a JSSA Hospice and Transitions Volunteer

**ENVIRONMENTAL TIPS!
A Green Thanksgiving**

Most people cook or bake up a storm in the kitchen and way over-do the Thanksgiving thing. In the spirit of attempting your first official green Thanksgiving this year, try to temper it down a little with the old adage 'less is more'. As mentioned before, Americans waste about 25 percent of prepared food on Thanksgiving every year. Think about how much money that could be in savings when you consider the total cost of providing a large gathering a giant feast.

<http://www.theenvironmentalblog.org/2011/11/green-thanksgiving/>



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OPEN HOUSE

Friday, November 14
Sunday, November 16
10:00 a.m.

RSVPs are appreciated but not a must to Karen Gerton (kareng@bnaisraelcong.org). If you are unable to attend, contact us to schedule a tour.

KAREN GERTON
Schilit Nursery School Director
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