LIFE

Pet Therapy: A place of dogs and love

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Everyone experiences stress. Whether it's because of exams, homework or relationships issues, sometimes we need to relax and take a break. While there are many ways to accomplish this, the best one is going to Pet Therapy, a resource offered by the University of Connecticut's Student Health and Wellness program that gives students an opportunity to spend time with one or more therapy dogs.

According to Leah Nelson, SHaW's health promotion graduate assistant, Pet Therapy's dogs come from Tails of Joy, a therapy dog organization.

Nelson said Pet Therapy is soothing for students, especially those who have pets.

"So many students are living away from their pets, sometimes for the first time in their lives," Nelson said. "And we know that there's data and evidence that supports the idea that petting an animal or being with an animal has so many positive benefits for mental health."

Pet Therapy takes place on Tuesdays from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Storrs Cordial House, in a quiet and peaceful environment.

"We love having Pet Therapy at the Storrs Cordial House because it's the home of the UConn Recovery Community," Nelson said. "And so, by bringing in folks that might not have ever heard of the UConn Recovery Community but are coming here for Pet Therapy, they get exposed to these different resources that exist on campus."

Pet Therapy is partnered with some campus events. They come to the William Benton Museum of Art every first Thursday of the month. They also come to the Homer Babbidge Library during finals week.

During Pet Therapy sessions, two dogs visit, spending time with students one dog after another.

Multiple dogs are a part of Pet Therapy. They come from various breeds, including golden retrievers, boxers and black labs.

Portia, a golden retriever, has been a pet therapy dog for four or five years. She's very chill, furry and loves to be pet by everyone. She usually wears a red bandana scarf with her name on it.

Portia's owner, Jeanne Ladd, said Portia started her training at a later point in her life because she was active, a trait that's contrary to the therapy dog personality.

"She had a lot of skills, but she also had a lot of energy," Ladd said.

Portia's training was a multiple-step process, according to Ladd.

"She did puppy kindergarten, basic obedience and family dog classes," Ladd said. "In those classes, the trainers did some activities with her, such as the musical freestyle, which is behaviors to music."



Therapy dog Lucie sits on the lap of a student. This resource is offered by UConn's Student Health and Wellness department.

PHOTO BY JAYLYN DAVIS, STAFF WRITER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Besides training, Portia had to be evaluated, Ladd said. The evaluations came with a few rules.

"You don't use treats, and you talk to the dog in a conversational manner," Ladd said. "You don't want to yell or scold or demand or command any behaviors."

Ladd said Portia's biggest challenge while being trained was walking nicely on a leash and not being too eager to see other people or dogs. Despite this, Portia passed all her training and evaluations.

Another Pet Therapy dog is Millie, a 6-year-old cocker spaniel and Australian shepherd mix and a therapy dog of four years. Like Portia, Millie is very serene and sweet. Her owner, Christine Anderson, brought business cards with Millie's picture, name, title, birthday and Instagram handle, @missmilliemillie.

Anderson also brought a photobook with numerous photos of Millie. The book's very first photo was one of Millie's mother. Some photos have Millie and her siblings. Others show Millie playing outside. One has Millie wearing pigtails.

Anderson said Millie must have vet visits, skills tests and trainings every other year. She also said that Millie once had an older brother who passed away, and that Millie experienced grief shortly after her brother's loss.

"She was just really down for a while," Anderson said. "She wandered around the house looking for where he was."

The third dog is Tucker. He's a 7-year-old golden retriever who's been a therapy dog for three or four years. He came to the Benton's most recent First Thursday.

Tucker is a humungous couch potato. If someone is sitting on an armchair, Tucker will hop onto it and sit in that person's lap.

His owner, who chose to remain anonymous, said Tucker underwent an eight-week training session before becoming a therapy dog. She also said she and Tucker visit elementary schools and nursing homes.

Another dog that came to the Benton's most recent First Thursday was Lucie, a deaf boxer. Like Tucker, Lucie loves to sit on her peers' laps. She also likes to kiss those she approaches.

Many other dogs are a part of Pet Therapy. Their names are Ernie, Scout, Shelby, Wrigley, Oliver, Sophie, Finley, Seneca, Toby, Tenley and Lady Juno.

Nelson said one of her goals for Pet Therapy is to continue bringing awareness to it.

"There are a lot of students on this campus, and we're not always able to reach every student with our marketing technique," Nelson said.

For those interested in learning more about Pet Therapy, check out its website.



Therapy dog Portia sits and enjoys attention from students. This resource is offered by UConn's Student Health and Wellness department.

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