Being a Therapy Dog Team

“My dog would make such a good therapy dog!” I heard that statement a lot and I never doubt that there is not at least some truth to the person’s words as they address me. I have been blessed beyond measure to have my Springers, Bo, Ty and Bear come into my life.

During COVID, it was painful to be sidelined because even though people say our visits are a blessing to patients and staff, the fact is the visits are a even larger blessing to me.

So, would your dog be a good therapy dog? Perhaps, but honestly the best way to evaluate the possibility of therapy service is to work backwards…without the dog. Is the dog’s temperament important? Sure, but frankly they either are naturally good at therapy work or they aren’t. The variables lie with the person, so let’s begin there.

First, do you have time to take the dog on a visit? Of all the different dog training programs that are out there (and there are some great ones right here in Smyth County!) not a single program award’s the dog a driver’s license after completion of their course.

Silly point? Not really. Bo and Ty got their start at Smyth County Community Hospital because Lindy White was seeking dog therapists who would come by regularly. At that time the requirements for hospital visits were not nearly as complex as today.

There were literally hundreds of dogs in Smyth County who qualified as therapy dogs but did not serve. Why? Because no one brought them to the hospital. So… number one question about handling a therapy dog is:

* Do I have the time?

Next, while you are being honest with yourself, you need to ask, “How far can I travel?” Even if you have an hour or so each week to spare, you can only drive so far during that time and leave time for the visit and a return trip.

A few years ago, I had a request to visit a care facility in Abingdon. Even though Abingdon isn’t that far away, a year’s worth of weekly visits would put over 1,500 miles on my truck. In contrast, the hospital is only one exit up from my office. I can be there in 5 minutes. So the next question is:

* What is a reasonable travel distance for me and my dog?

Once you have a radius of travel, who in that radius needs your help? And if they need your help, what level of training and certification do they require? Even if you are training the dog for much the same job, the levels of training and the expense of those trainings vary greatly (from $35 to $800 per dog per year.) So the next question is:

* Who needs us and what do they require?

This next self-reflection is a bit tougher because it requires brutally frank honesty? If you didn’t have the dog, would you consider visiting there anyways? If the dog is the only reason you go, visitation could turn into “show and tell” and if this is the case, you’ll soon tire from the routine of regular visitation. So the next question is:

* Would you go visit by yourself?

So now, after you run this gauntlet of self evaluation you are ready to ask yourself if therapy dog work is right you.

1. Do you have the time to start with?
2. How far am I willing to travel?
3. Who needs me and what training do they require?
4. Is it so important to me, that I’d go without the dog?

If you have good responses to those questions, now you are ready to go get your puppy trained and join the team of caregivers!

Upcoming Events

June 23 Deadline to consign VQA calves to Aug sale

June 24-28 VA 4-H Congress, Blacksburg

July 7-10 Forestry PD for Teachers, Bill Worrell (bworrell@vt.edu)

July 7-11 Smyth County 4-H Camp

July 8 VQA Sale

July 14 VQA Steer Take-Up

July 16 VQA Heifer Take-Up (depending on numbers…. Could be a one-day take-up)

July 21-23 Virginia Beef Cattle University, The Inn, VA Tech Campus

July 29 Youth Day at Rich Valley Fair… stay tuned for more information

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, veteran status, or any other basis protected by law. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia