

CALGARY HERALD

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Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald

Angela Blenkhorne takes Bernie, her four-year-old deaf St. Bernard, to various places to help cheer people up.

Animals offer healing power

Pet-assisted therapies benefit humans in crisis

ANGELA BLENKHORNE
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

Most of us think of seeing-eye dogs when we hear the term "service animal." But animals of all kinds are being used in a variety of animal-assisted therapy settings, whether to help those with physical disabilities or as partners in emotional well-being.

We were unaware of this therapy's far-reaching benefits until four years ago, when we adopted a gentle, goofy, deaf and tailless St. Bernard puppy from the City of Calgary Animal Services. Raising Bernie, now the size of a Shetland pony, has taught us lessons we didn't realize we needed.

Training a deaf dog is not much different than training a hearing one — it just takes a little more patience.

Thanks to the help of Miranda Bourque of the Foothills Animal Hospital in Okotoks, we learned to communicate with Bernie using hand signals. Rather than using only sounds or smells, dogs are hardwired to read our body language and energy for intent. Luckily, Bernie will do just about anything for a piece of turkey or sweet potato and responded quickly to cues learned through operant conditioning — or clicker training — to perform desired behaviours.

As Bernie grew — and grew and grew — her steady temperament became apparent. We wanted to share this with a wider audience so we began to contact groups to find a fit for Bernie's special gifts through voluntary visits.

In the past two years, we've visited with groups of children navigating the emotional landmines arising from the death of a loved one or fallout after divorce, at-risk teens attending alternative school programs, adults with developmental disabilities, and isolated seniors who are often homebound with no outside visitors.

No matter the recipients — whether one on one or in a group — the novelty of seeing and patting a St. Bernard and learning how to interact with Bernie using hand signals guides us through each visit. This format keeps our audience engaged, visibly more relaxed, and temporarily takes the focus off issues in their lives.

Those who visit with Bernie may often feel they don't fit in with society, have nothing of value to contribute, or are vulnerable because of situations they are experiencing. Spending time with a dog that was abandoned and is not considered normal provides a non-judgmental, non-threatening connection, encouraging a safe environment to help process complicated emotions.

Our city's larger care facilities have also benefited from pet therapy visits. Since 1985, more than 50 local hospitals, nursing homes, day programs, group homes and a correctional centre have participated in programs with Calgary's Pet Access League

Society (PALS). The development of PALS was inspired by medical and psychological studies that show pets improve the emotional and physical well-being of humans. Interacting with a pet is known to reduce stress levels, lower blood pressure and relax breathing rates.

PALS is the largest non-profit, registered, charitable organization of its kind in North America dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of individuals through pet therapy. More than 450 Calgarians perform volunteer visits along with their four-legged friends, including dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs and ferrets.

According to the PALS website, "PALS volunteers must often communicate through their pets with people who may be withdrawn, disoriented or severely physically or cognitively disabled. Their generous efforts have resulted in patients verbally responding after not speaking for months, depressed or unresponsive people reaching out to connect with the pets, and people considered immobile turning toward or making physical contact with a PALS pet."

Sue McIntosh, founder of Healing Hooves in Cremona, about 80 km northwest of Calgary, offers equine-facilitated mental health therapy. Many clients look to Healing Hooves as their last hope after

all other counselling approaches have failed for them. Each horse at Healing Hooves comes to the pasture with its own story of struggle and journey back to trust, emphasizing the mutual benefits of the human-animal bond.

These benefits are particularly effective for children, many of whom have endured abuse, violence, anxiety and attachment issues. McIntosh notes, "studies show that children who have positive contact with animals tend to have higher self-esteem, are empathetic and nurturing."

She has witnessed the strength of this bond, particularly when we feel vulnerable, stressed or face challenges, loss or major change. McIntosh adds, "animals can help children express emotions, seek social support and problem solve. This results in developing coping strategies and reducing post-traumatic stress reactions."

Healing Hooves programs are tailored to suit each client's needs; this is not one-size-fits-all therapy. Activities range from horse care, riding or simply being with the horse while feeling supported, nurtured, and encouraged to talk with a counsellor.

We didn't truly understand the impact of our region's pet therapy community until our "little Saint" bounced into our lives, showing how animals can help us learn the healing power of hearing less and listening more.

For more information on animal-assisted therapy visits, visit www.adventureswithbernie.com, www.palspets.com, and www.healing-hooves.ca

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