

Words & photos by Ed Marsh



RANCHO COASTAL HUMANE SOCIETY PET ASSISTED THERAPY

LOCAL DOGS ENABLE JOY FOR ALL

Sherry Weinblatt, of the Rancho Coastal Humane Society (RCHS) Pet Assisted Therapy (PAT) program, is as excited as her therapy dog, Diego, as he eagerly awaits his next command (and the treat that comes after). In her new role as RCHS PAT Coordinator, Sherry will be helping to scale-up operations again after a nearly two-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sherry—along with Get Pawsitive Dog Training owner Sarah Surritt—are working with Diego reinforcing routine commands in anticipation of upcoming visits.

Pet Assisted Therapy, which utilizes trained animals to provide soothing and calming human-animal interaction, has become increasingly common in schools, clinics, and assisted living centers. According to the Center for Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University, such interactions can have “profound physiological consequences. People in the presence of animals are often perceived to be more happy and healthy.”

The PAT program is finding new life and reinvigoration this spring. At the recent Animal Camp, held at RCHS in Encinitas, students ages seven to eleven years old on spring break from local schools, got a chance to meet

therapy dogs from the RCHS PAT, and learn firsthand about human-animal interaction. Some of the children are slightly tentative when reaching out to pet an unfamiliar dog, but they universally relax and start to smile at the dog’s friendly response.

Each dog’s personality comes through in the interaction demonstrating how the animals could connect with different audiences. Diego—Sherry’s dog—is a bundle of barely contained energy and playfulness. Cody, a lively and shaggy thirteen-year-old mixed breed, wagged and smiled with delight at the interaction. He and his owner, Jill Peck-Murray of Del Mar, came to Animal Camp and both clearly enjoy the smiles on the kid’s faces. Jaci—a Labrador-Golden Retriever cross—owned by PAT participants Rick and Kristen Smith—also attended Animal Camp, and she responds to the kids with quiet, gentle acceptance.

Judy Sanzo, President of RCHS said, “Our Pet-Assisted Therapy dogs help people recover from or better cope with life’s challenges, reducing pain, and stress. The science is well documented—the affection is contagious! Our dogs work for hugs!” In numerous studies of subjects interacting

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with dogs, cats, horses, guinea pigs, rabbits, and even dolphins, scientists have measured lower blood pressure, reduced levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, and elevated levels of oxytocin—a hormone associated with feelings of happiness and well-being. Trained therapy animals have become an accepted part of working with victims of trauma, such as veterans with PTSD, as well as special needs adults and children, particularly those with communication/socialization challenges, such as autism.

Rancho Coastal PAT also does outreach with Assisted Living centers. According to John Van Zante, RCHS Director of Public Relations, many seniors living in assisted living centers have had to give up their own pets, or are missing a pet from their past, and interacting with the therapy dogs can really brighten up their day.

The benefit of human-animal interaction also extends beyond the therapeutic arena to everyday life. The Rancho Coastal PAT program does community outreach with schools of all levels, where children who may not have pets at home can experience the benefits of animal bonding. And not just smaller kids: Van Zante explained how students at Cal State University

San Marcos benefited during Finals Week when the therapy dogs visit campus. “You can visibly see the stress melt away as they pet the dogs.”

Many of the dogs partnered with RCHS have trained at Get Pawsitive Dog Training, conveniently located right next door. “It’s a great partnership,” said Sarah Surritt, owner of Get Pawsitive, who has collaborated with RCHS for fifteen years, training both animals and sometimes RCHS staff. To become a therapy animal, dogs must first be evaluated for the qualities of temperament, friendliness, and tolerance for strangers and unfamiliar surroundings. Those dogs who meet the criteria and pass the certification test as American Kennel Club (AKC) Good Canine Citizens—and whose owners also meet the criteria for a handler—can then be trained and evaluated as therapy dogs. Therapy dogs must demonstrate the ability to ignore distractions, such as the walker or cane of a senior, not be easily startled by sudden noises, and be confident enough to be left with strangers if the owner must leave the room. Owners and dogs that fulfill the requirements are rewarded with bringing joy, and helping people cope with stress in their lives for years to come.