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Local News

Pet Therapy

Bailey the St. Bernard visits residents of Stratford Court Assisted Living

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by [Ashley Harrell](#)

Clad in a kelly-green vest that read, "I love working for hugs and kisses," Bailey the 4-year-old St. Bernard made her regular rounds through Stratford Court Assisted Living Saturday morning, stopping in each resident's room to say hello and give some love.

"She's so sweet – she makes my day!" said resident Ruth Young as Bailey approached on the leash of her owner, Nick Poulos.

A volunteer with the Broward Humane Society Pet Therapy Program, Poulos has been taking his 160-pound dog to the assisted living ward on every other Saturday for almost a year now. Poulos is on a first name basis with most of the residents, and has also learned a great deal about their families and interests.

"Many of them had dogs growing up, and they love to tell me stories about their pets," he said. "It's nice to bring happiness."

Poulos first takes Bailey around the ground floor, assisted living, where the dog receives endless attention from his regular admirers, and then the team moves upstairs to visit the residents who require special attention from the staff. Because he's so big, seniors can easily pet and interact with Bailey from their beds and wheelchairs.

Poulos also makes a point to introduce the dog to new residents.

Although not everyone warms up to Bailey immediately, Activities Director Lois Stolpman said it's only a matter of time before even the most standoffish senior requests that Bailey come to say hello.

"This is one of the resident's favorite programs," said Stolpman. "If they're having a day that isn't so great and then Bailey shows up, it changes their whole attitude. She's really become part of the community."

Recreation Director Siobhan Mangan said that the residents "love Bailey to pieces," and are extremely grateful to Poulos for bringing his dog.

"It makes it feel like home to have a pet around," said Mangan.

Stratford Court is just one facility that uses the Pet Therapy program, according to Marni Bellavia, the Pet Therapy Program Director for the Humane Society of Broward County (HSBC). Volunteers accompany their pets on visits to more than 120 nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, children's hospitals and other facilities in South Florida where people are in need of the unconditional love and affection offered by a pet, said Bellavia.

To become a therapy animal, your pet must be at least one year old, spayed or neutered, current on vaccinations, non-aggressive, interested in people and generally well-behaved.

You must have owned your animal for at minimum of one year. For more information, contact the HSBC at (954)266-6856 or email pettherapy@hsbroward.com.

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