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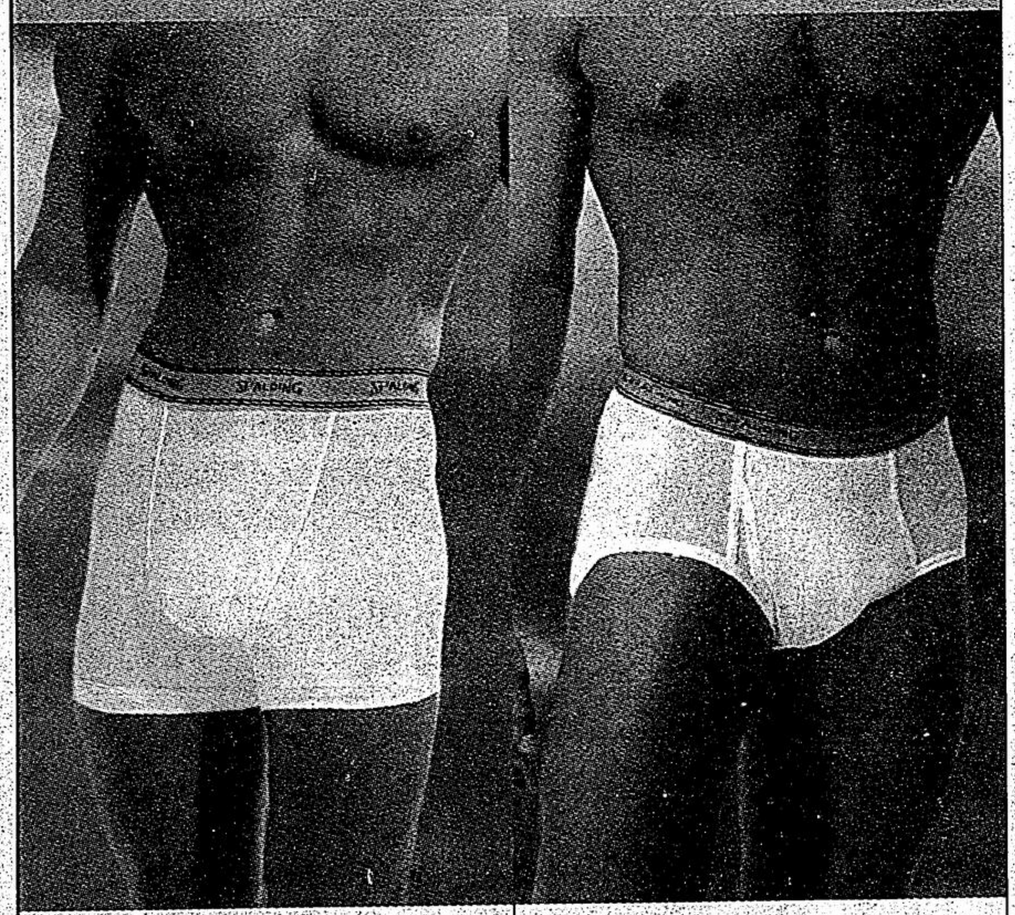

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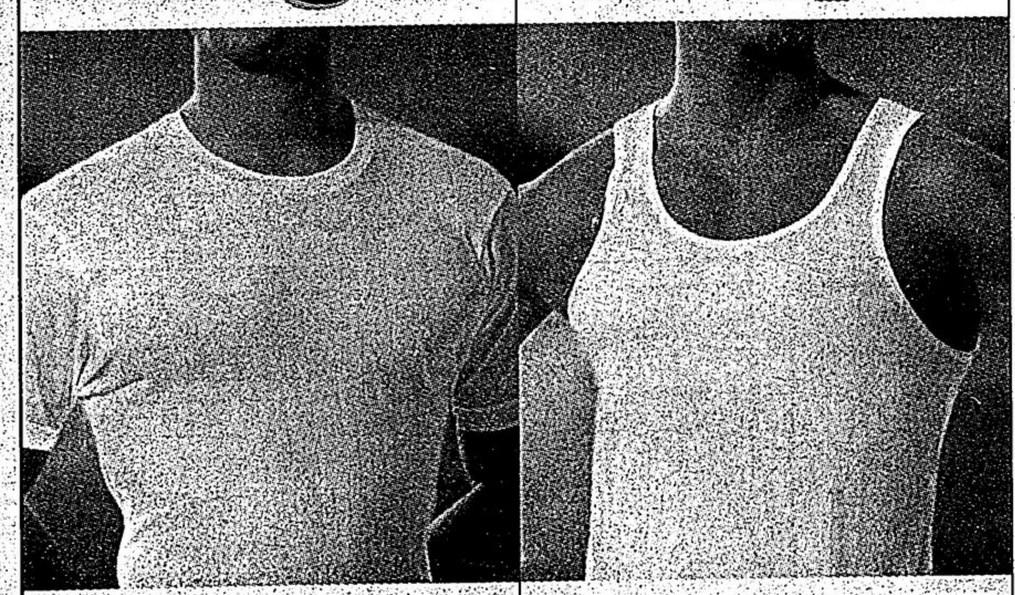

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Valid from June 7 to June 16, 2002 or until quantities last. Cannot be combined with any other offer.

Therapy dogs bring joy to York Region patients

BY WAI-YIN CHAN
Special

"I had a friendly dog that likes to be petted, and I didn't pet the dog enough."

This simple memory explains why York Region resident Linda Willis took up volunteering three years ago in the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program.

With her dogs Molly and Baillie, Willis — one of four co-ordinators throughout the region — visits seniors' residences and nursing homes, bringing joy to the elderly. Therapy dogs also cheer up hospital patients.

But seniors are not the only ones benefiting from St. John Ambulance.

The York Region branch consists of more than 300 volunteers, who organize training programs and provide community services.

The Therapy Dog Program, started in 1992, has 150 dogs and is one of the organization's highest-profile activities.

Vivian Hould, co-ordinator for the Newmarket division, said, "People like to hold them, pet them, give them treats and try to get them to do tricks".

Ms Hould said one woman kept her date with a therapy dog even when her daughter flew in from Vancouver for a visit.

"The woman said, 'I have to see my dog,'" Ms Hould laughed. "She ranked her dog over her daughter."

St. John Ambulance's 10-year-old Therapy Dog program is one of its most popular initiatives. A total of 150 dogs visit seniors and hospital patients

Petting and stroking pets is believed to have calming effect, decreasing blood pressure and relieving tension.

"One woman told me that after petting the dog, she forgot her leg was hurting," said Ms Willis.

Besides therapy dogs, St. John Ambulance offers a variety of training, including first aid and CPR for businesses, adults and teens.

In fact, it's the courses — along with donations and sales of first-aid kits — that help pay the non-profit organization's bills.

The babysitting course is for teens between 11 and 14. "They are taught to change diapers, give baths and resolve conflicts," explained training co-ordinator Diana Snape.

They also receive basic first aid training.

All this aside, St. John Ambulance is still best known for having emergency staff at sports, entertainment, political and cultural events.

Each month the branch receives 15 to 30 requests to staff such gatherings.

The Richmond Hill Winter Carnival is one of the public functions staffed by St. John Ambulance personnel.

"They are important presence," said carnival chairperson Elizabeth McCartney.

"We have youngsters snowboarding (during the carnival). Parents are relieved to know they have quick medical support should injuries occur."