

WELLNESS: Stouffville retriever on stage at ACC with Dog Whisperer

Blind therapy dog keeps them smiling

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Joanne George's dog Smiley may have been born without eyes, but he has powers beyond sight.

The seven-year-old golden retriever passed the St. John's Ambulance therapy dog test in May, a four-hour exam that also required references to prove Smiley is safe around people, especially children.

While guide dogs are trained from the time they are puppies, therapy dogs can be trained when they are older, according to Mrs. George. At the test, she was wearing flip flops and Smiley followed the sound of the shoes as well as her voice and smell.

"We were in awe of how she had a relationship with the dog. You never would have known he had a disability," said Leslie Bullock, co-ordinator of the St. John Ambulance therapy dog program in Markham.

"She was walking up and down the stairs, around curves and he was just following her," Ms Bullock said. "You just learn to adjust, move forward. He doesn't complain."

If Markham Stouffville Hospital could have 10 dogs visiting patients, they would, she said

Mrs. George lives in Stouffville with her husband, their 16-month-old son Shepherd and two border collies. She grew up in Markham and began volunteering with the Markham-Stouffville St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program in May.

For four months, she and Smiley have been visiting Participation House, a Markham residential centre that provide services and supports, including social, recreational and educational programs for adults with disabilities.

"He is an amazing dog. I wanted to share him with people," Mrs. George said.

Being part of a therapy program increases the bond between owner and dog, Mrs. George said.

"I don't know who gets more out of it — Smiley, the residents or myself," she said. "There is no better feeling than when you help somebody else or enrich their life."

Already, she has witnessed amazing responses from Participation House residents.

One man who doesn't speak has been known to smile and laugh when the dog visits.

"You can tell he loves Smiley," Mrs. George,



Joanne George (centre) helps Smiley, her blind therapy dog, pay a visit to Howard Thoms, a resident of Participation House, a residence for adults with disabilities. Smiley appeared Monday at the Air Canada Centre with the Dog Whisperer, Cesar Millan.

37, said.

Residents who normally have to be moved using a hoist have been known to grab a ball when Smiley comes around, making movements staff have never seen from these residents.

Nurses and other staff alike gather to watch Smiley work. Mrs. George has noticed residents so look forward to the visits that if she comes at a different time than normal, they will point to their watches disapprov-

ingly when she arrives.

As she signs in at the residence each week, she can hear the voices of residents already saying "Smiley, Smiley", in anticipation of his visit.

But Ms George has noticed few residences in Markham and Stouffville are lucky enough to receive visits from a therapy dog.

There are many facilities that want to have a therapy dog, she said.

Need is especially great in retirement

homes and libraries, which run reading programs in which a dog will lie beside a child while he or she reads.

Ms Bullock has also noticed the shortage. "I get requests for dogs all the time," Ms Bullock said. "I just don't have them."

Demand also comes from nursing homes, hospitals and schools that want to run bite prevention programs.

"We should have a lot more dogs," Ms Bullock said.

If Markham Stouffville Hospital could have 10 dogs visiting patients, they would, she said. They now have two visiting one hour a week. "It truly does cheer people up," Ms Bullock said.

Smiley became somewhat of a celebrity this week. He appeared Monday in Cesar Millan's (aka the Dog Whisperer) live show at the Air Canada Centre, part of a cross-country tour sharing his wisdom about dog behaviour and psychology.

Smiley was showcased as an inspirational dog.

"Everywhere we go, people are amazed by how happy he is," Mrs. George said, explaining this is why she named him Smiley.

"The difference between a dog and a human is dogs don't dwell on their disabilities. They just move forward and adapt," Mrs. George said.

Part of Mr. Millan's philosophy is that dogs should not be treated like humans, being dressed up or sleeping in human beds, Mrs. George said. Treating dogs like humans can bring on behavioural problems.

"If we treat dogs as dogs, they will respect us as humans," Mrs. George said, repeating what she learned from Mr. Millan.

She is a dog trainer and had sent Mr. Millan a tape of herself, her son and Smiley. The show had been asking people to send in tapes of their dogs with behavioural problems. While Smiley does not have any behavioural problems, he has a lot to teach an audience, she said.

Mrs. George's appearance on the show with Smiley was a highlight for her.

"(Mr. Millan) has been my idol for years," Mrs. George said. "His methods work. I have rehabilitated unadoptable dogs using his methods," she said.

Mrs. George does private at-home dog training for people and their dogs.

Her visits to Participation House won't be ending any time soon. She has made a promise to the residents. "As long as Smiley can walk, I will take him every week," she said.

Go to www.sja.ca for more information on the St. John's Ambulance therapy dog program.



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