

Dog nobody wanted has made thousands 'smile'

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Stouffville's got an international celebrity with a contagious smile. No, it's not a politician. It's Smiley the blind therapy dog, who – along with his owner Joanne George – will receive the award for Citizen of the Year from The Sun-Tribune for their phenomenal work in the community.

Smiley's international fame aside, him and George continue to work, volunteer and help the local community whatever way they can. He volunteers twice a week for St. John's Ambulance, visiting local schools, nursing homes and hospitals to do what he does best – make people smile.

"I've always said he's such a special dog," George said. "I realized how he could help people, cheer them up, make them happy, so I wanted to try and share him as much as I could."

Smiley's distinguished smile and his relaxed personality resonate greatly with anyone he meets. George regularly receives messages from people saying Smiley helped them through tough times. Sales of his new bobblehead are assisting St. John's.

He participates in a reading program at the Whitchurch-Stouffville Library – Paws for Stories.

At the program, Smiley encourages children who have trouble reading or are nervous to read aloud to him. While children read, Smiley sits by their side gently responding to their touch and voice.

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"The kids dial down, they feel more comfortable, more relaxed, and they're able to perform much better," said library CEO Carolyn Nordheimer James. "It's not

just children who have difficulty reading, it's children who have difficulty socializing, and it's the same benefits, less pressure, less stress, more welcoming, it's wonderful to see them come out of their shell."

His therapy visits have taken him to several schools, including most recently to Wendat Village Public School, where children with autism between kindergarten and grade 3 got a chance to open up and communicate with Smiley with his comfortable aura by their side.

"These kids were non-verbal," George said. "Within 20 minutes of being around Smiley, they even started talking to me."

George says she's "very humbled" by the award.

"It's very emotional," she said. "I love what we do; you don't expect to get that kind of award or recognition."

It's not just Stouffville that's recognized Smiley and George. With more than 101,000 followers on Instagram, 27,000 likes on Facebook, honours from the Governor General of Canada and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, appearances on talk shows in the United States including Meredith Vieira and Cesar Millan, Smiley's recognition has crossed all borders, straight into the hearts of thousands.

When asked why Smiley resonates with so many people, George said it's his inspirational story.

At age 13 now, Smiley and George first met 11 years ago when she was working at a veterinary technician.

"We were called out to a puppy mill, SPCA made a list of 20 dogs that needed care," George said. "We were called in there to euthanize the dogs but the owner let us take the dogs instead, Smiley was one of them."

"We found everyone homes, but no one would take Smiley," she added.

Smiley had scars and gashes on his face and ears because of other dogs at the puppy mill. Many people rejected Smiley on the grounds that he would be too difficult to train due to his blindness, but George and the young golden retriever persevered.

"Dogs can recover, forget about the past and still become something great," George said.

She added that his story encourages and motivates people to recover, to bounce back and to persevere.



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Smiley and Joanne George will receive citizen of the year honours on Canada Day.

At general classroom visits, Smiley's story helps children understand why bullying is wrong and hurtful.

George says children see how Smiley was treated unfairly in his youth at the puppy mill and realize it's not his fault.

"You don't need to elaborate, they get it," she said. "They can make the connection to the kid in the next class that doesn't deserve to be picked on."

The anti-bullying message also encourages children to give back to their community, just as Smiley does. George hopes that meeting Smiley changes children's perspective on how to treat others.

Smiley's been a therapy dog for seven years. In his down time, like any other dog, he goes to the cottage, swims and plays.

At his home near Musselman's Lake –

where he has most his walks – Smiley spends his time with Pippi, George's other dog.

Smiley can find his way around the house and the back yard with his sense of touch and smell. Though his hearing is weaker than it used to be, he still responds to calls and sounds with great enthusiasm. A gentle stroke of his ears and he turns right around to face you, equipped with his signature smile.

Golden retrievers generally live until the age of 14 or 15. George expressed her sorrow of the inevitable, but said she has no regrets.

"We've done great things," she said. "He's so special; he's a gift I had to share."

The citizen of the year award will be presented July 1 at 6 p.m. during the opening ceremonies of the Strawberry Festival at the Memorial Park bandshell.

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Butter Tart Ride (Town of Newmarket - 15 km)
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