

## News-Press LOCAL



PLAYFUL PUP, "Benji" the Bichon Frise, brings a smile to a senior resident. (PHOTO: NEWS-PRESS)

# PAL Pooches Lift Seniors' Spirits at Goodwin House

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FALLS CHURCH NEWS-PRESS

Local dog owners and their four-legged companions have begun volunteering hand in paw with the People Animals Love group to bring furry friendship to the young-at-heart residents at the Goodwin House retirement community in Bailey's Crossroads.

"People Animals Love" (PAL), a Washington, D.C.-based non-profit organization, fosters comfort

through human-animal interaction with periodic social visits to area children, medical facility patients and senior residents.

Recently, dogs ranging from lap-size chihuahuas to gentle-giant labradors recently gathered with their owners in the Goodwin House lobby before their monthly visit began, saying hello with sniffs during the sign-in period, and even greeting the *News-Press* with a few friendly licks.

A three-legged golden retriev-

er named Kodi kept up the pace with the other dogs without so much as a hitch. The 10-year-old pooch lost the fourth limb to a disease of his elbow joint in 2007. Tricia Lowney, Kodi's owner, said the pup receives special attention when she and husband Bob take him to visit patients at the Veteran Administration Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

"It's amazing how the amputees are drawn to him," said Lowney, telling the story of one war veteran who lifted his pant leg to expose his own amputated limb. "A lot of people are hesitant to pet him where his leg is missing, but this gentleman rubbed it and said, 'Look, Kodi, we have something in common, my friend.'"

Words were few and far between during last month's Goodwin House visit, but countless expressions of childlike gratitude graced the residents' faces, many of whom had a hard time parting with their temporary canine companions when they had to leave.

"You can come live with me," said a hospice resident to a Bichon Frise named Benji. Benji's owner, Nan Siemer, said she realized her dog had a gift when her mother fell terminally ill with Alzheimer's disease and asked for him by name. Benji provided much of her mother's comfort during her last days.

Rene Wallis, executive director

of PAL since last October, said it's not uncommon for hospice patients to request an animal to stay with them during their last few days of life once a bond is developed with a particular pooch.

"The number one issue I've seen is that when folks move into an assisted living or retirement community, they're lonely, isolated and often times, they've had to leave pets behind when they've relocated," said Wallis.

Organized in 1981 by Dr. Earl Strimple, a D.C. veterinarian, PAL now has more than 300 teams of volunteers who bring their animals to the socially isolated throughout the D.C. metro region. Among those pet owners, there are currently 240 dogs certified to lend a helping paw through social visits. According to Wallis, however, the aging population is expected to double within the next 30 years, when even 200 plus dogs won't be enough to cover the bases of seniors who could benefit from them.

"The animal visits have been a way for a secluded population to co-mingle with the outside world," said Wallis, who noted the dogs often serve as the bridge between volunteers and the visited, often resulting in a human-to-human connection many residents without local relatives lack.

The group branched into Northern Virginia more than 10 years ago, holding other Falls Church visits at the Northern Virginia Mental Health Institute and INOVA Fairfax Hospital.

Lowney and her husband, who joined PAL efforts in April 2008, also take Kodi to Pohick Regional Library in Burke, where children struggling to read practice by reading aloud to a PAL dog.

"A lot of children from military families want to be around the dogs because they can't own one," said Lowney, who noted one little girl started reading at a whisper level to Kodi. "I gave him the hand signal to bark and after he did, she started to read louder, overcoming her fear of reading out loud."

Siemer adds a personal touch to her visits by taking snapshots of the Goodwin House residents holding Benji, bringing back a framed copy upon the pair's return.

"I gave a picture to this one woman who's usually very stern and she immediately lit up and said, 'That's me and my doggy,'" said Siemer, who sometimes stays after to spend more time with the residents.

"I can see the calm in their face. People who don't say a word otherwise will talk to man's best friend."

## Friendly Furry Faces

Meet some of the other People Animals Love (PAL) pooches who're lending a helping paw in the Falls Church area.



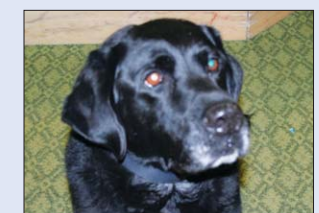
KODI, owned by Bob & Tricia Lowney



OLIVE, owned by Carolyn Caruso



POLO, owned by Moe & Stephanie Cheramie



BAILEY, owned by Kathryn Sullivan



TOPPER, owned by Nikki Hall



MIMI, owned by Moe & Stephanie Cheramie

(PHOTOS: NEWS-PRESS)



A RESIDENT feeds a treat to "Finn" the Tibetan Terrier owned by Kim Peter Kovak and Deirdre Lavrakas. (PHOTO: NEWS-PRESS)