FOUR PAWS, ONE CAUSE

Animals can help in so many ways, from physical to emotional.

BY KATIE JOHNS AND KAYLEIGH OMANG

They can help the visually impaired lead a fulfilling life. They can melt the cold exterior of a juvenile offender. They can be the connection for a child trying to find his or her place in a confusing world.

Therapy animals are making life a little better for their human companions.

In our region, myriad groups and organizations help bring together service animals and therapy pets to those in need, boosting the physical and mental health of those touched by the experience.

Here, we focus on a few.

LEADING THE WAY

Chad Bouton was 15 when he was told he would never be able to drive.

When Bouton was 11 and his sister was 10, they were diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic disorder that causes a breakdown and loss of cells in the retina.

Bouton has no peripheral vision. He said the easiest way to explain how much he can see is to look through a straw. That small circular opening is how much he can see.

In middle school, Bouton used the familiar white-tip cane. He never liked it. He thought he didn't need it, nor did he want people to see him with it, even though he said his vision problem wasn't a secret.

And the cane didn't really help him negotiate the everyday obstacles in life — stairs, curbs, cracks in sidewalks.

"Using the cane, it was kind of a personal defeat for me," Bouton said. "I didn't want to have to use it because for me, it would mean I'm admitting that I have this really serious vision problem, and I can't do anything about it, so I have to use this tool that I don't want to use."

And then came Andros, a 6-year-old black mix of Labrador retriever and golden retriever, who was trained at Southeastern Guide Dogs from the time he was about 12 weeks old. Southeastern Guide Dogs places about 100 dogs each year, with more than 3,000 placed since its inception in 1982.

When asked how Andros helps him, it's easier for Bouton to ask, "How doesn't he help me?" Andros helps Bouton safely walk the streets, alerts him if a car or person is coming toward him, and helps him navigate stairs.

But more than maneuvering Bouton through physical obstacles, Andros has helped him through mental issues as well, such as depression.

"When you start to lose it (vision), you finally really start to understand just how much you use your vision," Bouton said. "When you can't do things you used to do, or you can't do things you want to do, you really start to get bummed out about it."

It's those times that Andros can be trusted to step up.

"All I have to do is look at him, and he has to look at me, and I just know everything is going to be OK," Bouton said. "So not only is he a guide dog, he's kind of like my emotional support dog."
LIFTING SPIRITS

When it comes to shelter animals, the question is often asked, who rescued whom?

For Lance, it was Nan Miller, who has been training therapy dogs since the 1990s. When Miller first spotted Lance across the yard at the Humane Society of Sarasota County, the Great Pyrenees mix was 40 pounds underweight, riddled with worms and terrified to come out of his kennel without assistance.

But it must have been love at first sight, because now Lance is Miller’s third therapy dog and her pride and joy.

“He was nervous at first, but quickly became the darling of the neighborhood,” Miller said. “They call him the mayor of my little subdivision. He has become the most incredible therapy dog.”

Lance is among several dogs that visit patients at Sarasota Memorial Hospital as part of its dedicated pet therapy program.

“The benefits to this type of program were just beyond words. Not only did it give them (patients) something fun and distracting to do while dealing with medical challenges, but it also provided some physiological benefits,” said Elizabeth Bornstein, an oncology-certified social worker at SMH.

Therapy pets make visits to patients on the hospital’s oncology and pediatric floors.

Bornstein said anything that brings a sense of calm to patients going through stressful medical care is helpful. Not only do hospital staff see a decrease in blood pressure and anxiety, but there is a sense of relaxation as well.

“You just see that patients really thrive from an experience such as this that may connect them to their own pets or times that felt better or easier when they weren’t sick and having to be in the hospital,” she said.

The benefits go beyond the patients, Miller said. Hospital staff are calmed by Lance’s presence, too. The staff will come out of the emergency room or operating rooms, with their scrubs still on, to pet Lance to unwind from their work.

“My dear friend calls him a four-legged Xanax,” Miller said. “He is so calm. He makes a lot of people happy.”

Lance’s rounds go beyond SMH, however. He also visits libraries, colleges, retirement homes and other locations where he can be of assistance.

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CALM IN COURT

Another place therapy pets make a difference is in the courts.

Twelfth Judicial District Circuit Court Judge Teri Dees is a proponent. She hears cases in the juvenile and dependency section at the circuit’s Manatee County Judicial Center.

The cases she hears can easily tug at the heartstrings – children removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect and abandonment who have been placed under the jurisdiction of the Florida Department of Children and Families. And there are the youthful offenders who are facing criminal charges.

Emotions can run high. But when a therapy dog strolls into the courtroom, tail wagging, the emotional temperature drops.

“They (children) kind of forget they’re walking into a courtroom location,” Dees said, which Chief Deputy Court Administrator Kim Miller added is by design.

“Judge Dees allows the handlers to bring the dogs anywhere around in the courtroom to kind of make everybody relax a little bit,” Miller said.

“It lowers the anxiety, the stress levels.”

“I think they kind of forget why they’re there,” Dees said.

“So they’re talking to you and sharing with you, but at the same time, they are responsible for holding a dog.”

Tough teens, too, can be softened when they start petting a therapy dog, she said.

“It can give you a little insight about a kid who puts on a front of not caring,” Dees said. “But he’s still a kid.”

Even kids in judicial proceedings have dreams, said Jackie Smith, whose therapy dog, Scout, works the courthouse circuit.

Smith recounted the story of a girl who said she wanted to be a veterinary technician when she grew up. Smith asked why not a veterinarian? She encouraged the girl to give it some thought.

“I just wanted to change that girl’s perspective and say ‘You can do more,’ but she doesn’t have a group standing behind her,” Smith said.
A REASON TO RIDE

When we think of therapy animals, it’s not just dogs that make the headlines. Think bigger – much bigger. Think horse big.

When Brandi Ezell and her 11-year-old son, Austin, moved to Sarasota, she knew they had to get involved with horses, even though neither of them had much experience.

Austin was diagnosed with autism when he was 5. Ezell said Austin is disconnected from the world, so when they visited Ezell’s cousin’s horse, she couldn’t believe what she saw.

“He connected to that horse immediately,” Ezell said. “He just walked right up to this horse he had never met, grabbed the halter and planted a big fat kiss.”

Ezell is now executive director of the Sarasota Manatee Association for Riding Therapy, better known as SMART.

Since joining SMART in 2014 as a volunteer, Ezell has seen what working with horses can do for someone with cognitive, social, physical or emotional challenges.

“Those of us who have been in the industry understand we are teaching life skills that they will take out to their schools, lives and homes,” she said.

Time spent in the saddle provides physical benefits, such as working core muscles, perfecting posture and tuning fine motor skills.

When a rider comes to SMART, they are matched with a horse and a team of volunteers who lead them through their ride. Working consistently with the same horse and team builds a bond and creates a sense of responsibility and ownership.

Ezell said. Not only do riders develop equestrian skills, they do activities that give the student one-on-one time with the animal.

Many students, including Ezell’s son, will visit SMART just to spend time with their horse.

“They (the horses) take in whatever you give them. They don’t hold grudges,” Ezell said. “They won’t hold it against you if you break down into tears. They pick up on feelings that you have.”