

Rottweilers used as resident therapy dogs

By DELANIA TRIGG
Register Staff Writer

MOUNTAIN SPRINGS — Turbo, a Rottweiler, and his companions, a calm little beagle named Julie and an enormous English mastiff, Bandit, came to the back door to see who stopped by their home.

It is a little intimidating to be greeted by the mastiff — who is the size of a small horse.

But the trio did not appear menacing.

After a while, Turbo, a registered therapy dog, began to look drowsy. He lie down on his belly on the cool floor, his limbs spread out.

Julie slowly sidled up next to the visitor, curling up beside her, nudging her hand with her nose.

Bandit lie on her side, sleeping and from her occasional twitches, possibly dreaming.

Turbo looked up occasionally. He seemed vaguely curious of the newcomer.

Turbo's owner, Mountain Springs businesswoman Pat Crawford, wants to introduce Turbo to the world.

She believes many people could use some education where dogs are concerned, and Turbo is the right dog for the job.

"Turbo is an exceptional dog," Crawford said. "I want to get him out in the community so he is well known."

One of the things Crawford said she does not like are generalized, negative statements about specific canine breeds.

Rottweilers — like some other breeds, such as Doberman pinchers and pit bull mixes often develop an undeserved reputation as vicious

(See DOGS, page 5A)

Dogs

dog breeds, she said.

Rottweilers, she pointed out, are no more likely to be dangerous than any other types of dogs.

According to the web site, Next Day Pets, Rottweilers are intelligent and require a firm hand when training. They can be extremely protective of their territory, yet they make good family pets.

Therapy dogs are another passion for Crawford.

A good therapy dog is "quiet, well-behaved and has its manners. It is not going to be startled by anything," Crawford explained.

Therapy dogs should also possess an intangible quality, something that helps them connect with people.

"To look in their face, you can just see that look. It tells you 'this is a therapy dog,'" she said.

She loves to talk about all her dogs, especially Turbo, who is often a winner at canine competitions and is also, apparently, Crawford's pride and joy.

The two frequently visit Pecan Tree Health and Rehabilitation Center where Crawford said her father is recovering at the care facility.

Her father loves to see Turbo.

To become a therapy dog, Turbo had to pass some tests. He is licensed and certified through the organization, Therapy Dog International (TDI).

The therapy dog evaluation, which Crawford said was administered at The Hound House in Carrollton, is open to all breeds.

Any dog can become a therapy dog, she said.

The test includes a temperament assessment.

Dogs are placed in a variety of situations — seated beside a person in a wheelchair, for instance — and left without their owner or handler for three minutes.



Making friends
Nursing home resident Lillie Mae Williams receives a visit from Turbo. His owner, Pat Crawford, said the dog is a hit with most residents. Crawford believes the dog therapy program provides both physical and psychological benefits to the residents.

(© Staff photo by Delania Trigg)

The tester is looking for certain qualities in the dog's behavior when he is left alone with an elderly or infirm person.

Will the dog be well-behaved and quiet? Will he remain so when his owner reenters the room?

Evaluators also watch how the dog reacts to therapeutic devices such as wheelchairs, scooters, canes and crutches.

How a dog deals with a sudden loud noise is also a consideration.

Crawford said during his test, Turbo's evaluator held a heavy book above her head and dropped it on the floor suddenly.

Turbo's reaction was nonchalant.

"He didn't blink an eye," Crawford said, smiling.

He was also exposed to food lying on the floor, a situation that could arise in a nursing facility.

While Turbo showed a natural interest in the food, he made no effort to pick it up, Crawford recalled.

Turbo was also expected to behave appropriately around young children and to walk a pattern both on and off lead, she said.

Turbo passed his therapy dog assessment with flying colors. He also passed a Canine Good Citizenship test.

The Good Citizenship test requires a dog to sit and stay

and walk, to be quiet while his owner is out of sight, to allow a stranger to approach, to be petted and to allow grooming.

Therapy dogs have positive effects on the people they serve, Crawford said.

Therapy Dogs International is a volunteer group organized to provide qualified handlers and therapy dogs for work in public facilities such as schools, nursing homes and public libraries.

On a recent visit to the Pecan Tree center, Activity Director Valorie Nelson, her son Riley, who volunteers at the center, Crawford and Turbo were making visits to residents' rooms.

The center also has another pet, Violet, a Corgi, whom residents seem to love.

"They (residents) don't get to bring their own dogs, so this is so good for them," Nelson said.

Some residents met Crawford and Turbo at the front entrance.

Crawford said sometimes she and her dog don't get too far past the front door before a group of people begin gathering around to pet Turbo.

Resident Martha Clack was thrilled when Crawford knocked on her door asking if she would like a visit from Turbo.

"Well, sure. Come on in," Clack said.

She got some kisses from Turbo who seemed more than happy to be giving them.

"He's such a beautiful dog," she remarked, running her hands over his thick fur.

Bud Foster, a retired D.J. who worked at radio station KGAF for many years, also lives at Pecan Tree.

He invited Turbo to get on his bed after Crawford knocked on the door.

Putting his arm around Turbo, he gave the dog a bear hug.

Foster — who staff said always has a lot of good stories to tell — petted Turbo for a few minutes while joking with Nelson and Crawford.



A healthcare worker gets to know Turbo, a tl

Even residents who are rarely verbal reacted positively to Turbo's presence.

An wheelchair-bound resident, seated beside her companion, did not say a word at first. She just put out her hand to touch Turbo and the dog instinctively drew closer to the woman.

She petted him, and for a moment, the elderly woman and the dog seemed to bond.

That is exactly what makes therapy dogs so special, Crawford said, the ability to reach people when humans cannot.

According to Crawford, therapy dogs are useful in more than a dozen settings including hospitals, assisted living centers, hospice agencies, nursing homes, schools, libraries, community outreach programs, private and public corporations, vacation Bible schools and women's shelters.

They can also offer comfort and healing to the bereaved.

"In addition to providing unconditional love while interacting with patients, dogs have a beneficial influence on the social, physical and mental condition of patients," Crawford said.

The dogs also, apparently, provide some health benefits.

"They can lower blood pressure and promote relax-

ation. They relieve agitation and stress in patients. They improve communications between humans. They reduce the need for drug therapy in some cases. They can also reduce aggression in certain adult substance abuse cases," she said.

She said therapy dogs can often connect with patients who are not responding to other forms of therapy.

"Someone who is withdrawn might be more willing to reach out to pet a dog than to try a less pleasant form of occupational therapy," she said.

Crawford said she has read the results of studies which prove therapy dogs do have physical effects on humans.

"These studies have shown that a person holding or petting an animal will cause a lowering of blood pressure, the release of strain and tension and can draw out a person from loneliness and depression," she said.

"Therapy Dog International was formed so that dogs could be certified, insured and registered as volunteer therapy dogs. The goal of the organization is to increase the number of available therapy dogs, give them the recognition they deserve and alert hospitals and schools and other institutions to the importance of therapy dog visits," Crawford said.

Dogs used for therapy vary in size and breed. "They are not all purebred," Crawford noted, "But they all have a love of people."

Therapy dogs are nothing new. TDI was formed in the late 1970s and is the oldest registry for therapy dogs in the United States.

The organization also supports a reading program. What makes this program different from other childhood literacy projects is that in TDI's program, children read to dogs.

The TDI web site (www.tdi-dog.org/children-readingtodogs.htm), states that children who are having trou-

ble with reading or who are reluctant to read in front of classmates or teachers, often enjoy reading to a canine companion.

Participating libraries and schools schedule reading hours for students and therapy dogs.

Reading to dogs can improve student's reading test scores and help improve their self-esteem, Crawford said, adding that dogs are not judgmental. "They will not criticize or ridicule," she remarked.

Crawford pointed out that both the reading program and the therapy dog activities are volunteer work for Turbo.

"No one is making money," she said.

For that reason, she said she secured an e-mail account just for Turbo.

Turbo is the main attraction. He's the one who is doing the good work, she pointed out.

Crawford said anyone who is interested in finding out more about Turbo or perhaps scheduling him for a visit at a school or care facility, should send their inquiries to Turbo at therapydog@ntin.net.

Crawford expects she and Turbo to have a busy summer.

She also hopes to have him visit students during sessions of a local Vacation Bible School.

Crawford — who once served as chairman of the Lake Ray Roberts Planning and Zoning Board — said she hopes she and Turbo will make a positive contribution to the community.

Her education programs are geared toward elementary through middle school students and adults.

Crawford has a simple explanation for why she began her community programs with Turbo: "Therapy dogs are about taking time to pause a while for love."

*Reporter Delania Trigg
may be
contacted at
dtrigg@ntin.net*