



Visiting HRC Manor Care in Whitehall on Monday nights are therapy dogs and their owners from left, Tom Bandi with Tiffany, Phyllis Bandi with Amber Star, Scott Robinson with Thunder and Deuce, Emil Pohodich with Sadie, Barbara Pohodich with Lexi, and Janet Malinsky with Brittney and Courtney.

THERAPY DOGS

fetch smiles from patients



Virginia List hugs Brittney.

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Eight visitors at HRC Manor Care Health Services in Whitehall cause quite a stir on Monday nights.

Wearing ribbons and bows and remaining on their best behavior, they're anxious to greet everyone. The Manor Care patients and staff can't wait to see them.

The special visitors are therapy dogs that come each week to lift the spirits of the residents.

"Tiffany. Hello Tiffany. How are you doing," exclaims one woman, cradling the Yorkshire terrier in her arms.

Tiffany is a regular at Manor Care, along with Brittney, Courtney, Sadie, Lexi, Deuce and Thunder. A Yorkshire terrier puppy, 11-

month-old Amber Star, is a therapy dog in training that has just started to make the rounds with the other dogs.

"They are all so beautiful and they don't talk," jokes resident Imelda Buesker, who will celebrate her 90th birthday in December. "Sometimes they even try to kiss me."

Nancy Basach is an eight-year resident of the facility.

"I look forward to the dogs' visit. I always do," she says. "I love the dogs."

Tom Pastorius of Carrick broke both his legs when he fell off a ladder while working and has been receiving therapy at Manor Care for more than three months. His young children love to visit him, especially when the dogs are there.

"On Monday, they don't come to see me, they come to see the dogs," says Pastorius,

gently stroking Tiffany. "That's their motivation to be good for the day."

Patient Dorothy Gehl sums up the dogs' visit simply: "These little guys just steal our hearts."

Comfort level

Not all dogs have the temperament to be a therapy dog. To become certified, a 1-year-old dog must pass rigorous testing and meet such requirements as basic obedience commands, being able to walk with a loose leash, walking through a crowd, reacting to distractions or to another dog, accepting a friendly stranger and supervised separation.

Phyllis and Tom Bandi of Upper St. Clair have been bringing their dogs, Tiffany and Amber Star, to the facility for more than eight years. The couple became involved in the therapy dog program after training at the Keystone Canine Club in Bethel Park.

"The more I trained, the more I enjoyed it, the more it seemed Tiffany enjoyed it," Phyllis says.

Because Tiffany was such an obedient dog, Phyllis decided to put her through the tests.

"There are about 17 things they have to pass," Phyllis says. "It's amazing all they have to do to become a good therapy dog. They are not allowed to cry, whine or bark. Tiffany did everything she was supposed



Tom Pastorius, recuperating after a fall from a ladder, pets Tiffany.

to do."

The therapy dog program has been a success at Manor Care since Scott Robinson of Whitehall first brought his dog, Thunder, a yellow Labrador, to the facility 10 years ago. Today, Thunder's son, Deuce, joins his father during visits.

Robinson was training Thunder at a facility which offered both the therapy dog test and the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen test, which rates dogs on such points as accepting a friendly stranger, sitting politely for grooming and reaction to another dog or distractions.

"Just after we took the test, this facility

opened and it was only blocks from my house," Robinson says.

Manor Care activities director Sandy Yetter told Robinson she was interested in trying pet therapy at the facility which provides skilled nursing and rehabilitation services.

"At first, they brought everyone into the activities room but it didn't really work well," Robinson recalls. "Then we decided to go room-to-room. People are more comfortable in their room, and more people would see the dogs because some people don't leave their room."

The Bandi's dog, Tiffany, has made more than 500 therapy visits. After 50 visits, Therapy Dogs International Inc. distributes awards to the dogs and their owners. The Therapy Dog International Exceptional Volunteer Achievement (TDIEVA) is the highest honor awarded, given for making 350 visits.

"We're keeping track in case they come up with another level," says Phyllis. "She does a lot of hard work."

In addition to Manor Care, on Wednesday and the weekends, the Bandis take their dogs to the Baptist Home on Castle Shannon Boulevard. Tiffany also performs with the Keystone K9ers at various nursing homes where she waltzes, sneezes and pulls a tissue out of box and even plays a

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Tom and Phyllis Bandi visit with Imelda Buesker, who holds Tiffany.



Berta Dignon enjoys the yellow labs, Thunder and Deuce.