

The Joys of Therapy DOGS

Many families have enjoyed the love of a “Pet Dog.” They know about the unconditional love, the happy wagging tail and the joy expressed when your furry friend gets a “treat.”



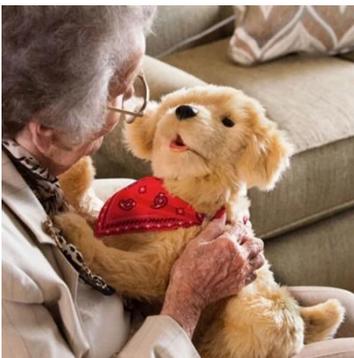
As we age sometimes being responsible for the care of a family dog is beyond our abilities. This void can be met with a Therapy Dog. The delights of interacting with a therapy dog, are multiple and varied for all people including those people living with Alzheimer’s or a related dementia. I did not know that there are more than [50,000 therapy dogs](#) in the US. During my time with GEM we have met some amazing therapy dogs! We are thrilled that Mary Lou Fahey and Breezy have been volunteering with us!

How does a dog become a certified pet therapy dog? I had no idea so I asked Mary Lou about Breezy and she shared: *“I brought Breezy home when she was just eight weeks old. I had spoken to her breeder about wanting a puppy that had the temperament to become a potential therapy dog and Breezy was chosen because of her outgoing, gentle nature. From the moment she came home, we showered her with love*

and provided positive reinforcement for the behaviors we wanted her to continue.

When she was twelve weeks old, Breezy and I began to visit public places to socialize her to a variety of people, places, noises, and environments. We took several classes together, some focused on obedience and others just for fun. These included puppy classes, agility, obedience, and trick classes.

Breezy earned her Canine Good Citizen certificate through the American Kennel Club (AKC), as well as other certificates. We then successfully passed a test given by the national organization, Alliance of Therapy Dogs (ATD), which evaluated her ability to behave appropriately in various situations and my ability to guide and partner with her. Once we completed that test, we were required to make three facility visits where we were observed by a tester to be certain we were both a good fit to become a therapy dog team. I also took classes at the University of Denver to further my education on dog therapy. As part of the team, it is important that I understand dog communication, behaviors, welfare, and stress so that Breezy has the best experiences possible in our work of bringing joy to those we are visiting.”



When Breezy walks in the room the smiles are everywhere our hands are reaching out to pet her. Breezy accommodates visiting each of us in turn! At a recent Harmony Café we learned that Breezy was trained to visit patients and gently lay just one paw on the bed. Breezy can also Hi Five and shake hands! We love our visits with Breezy and Mary Lou says Breezy looks forward to “going to work” or what we call her visits with us!

People living with dementia are going through progressive stages and sometimes a live dog is not as helpful as an interactive robotic pet. Meet the “Golden Pup” a product of [Joy For All Companion Therapy Pets for Alzheimer's](#).

Companion Pets are designed to bring comfort, companionship and fun to elder loved ones. With realistic fur and pet-like sounds - and sensors that respond to petting and hugs with familiar pet-like actions.

[Therapy pets](#) have a remarkable effect on individuals in the middle and later stages of Alzheimer's disease. They are calming, soothing and bring the person back to a time in their life when they felt useful and had a sense of purpose. [Alzheimer's pet therapy](#) helps individuals escape from a world where someone is always caring for them. Pets provide a chance to care for a living therapy dog or an automated Golden Pup!

GEM has a “golden pup” (thanks to the Albemarle Commission) in our office if you would like learn more! Our office hours are on Thursdays from 1-3pm. Call Gail at 252-380-3354 or email her at gsonnesso@gmail.com to learn when Breezy will be visiting or about our programming.