

Beating Loneliness

**Guide
Associ**

Gabrielle Chariton discovers the therapeutic benefits to the Pets as Therapy program.

Good-looking, intelligent, affectionate...sounds like a list of qualities people seek in a life partner.

It also describes the Guide Dog Association's Pets as Therapy dogs, who are chosen to become companions for the elderly, sick or disabled because of their gentle temperament and loyal nature. And, being labradors or golden retrievers, they are also exceptionally cute!

Australian society is ageing: figures show that 12 per cent of the population are aged 65 years and over. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has

According to one study, pet ownership can provide comfort in times of loss and stress and the constant companionship of an animal can promote mental stability. Other studies cite links between pet ownership and health. Apparently pet owners don't visit the doctor as often as others.

Owning a dog can also help those who have become ill or depressed. "If an older person is suffering very badly or is ill, having a dog to love gives them something to focus on other than their own loneliness or illness," explained Terrie.

"Pet ownership can provide comfort in times of loss and stress."

projected this figure to reach 22 per cent by 2031.

Retirement, illness, relocation from the family home to smaller premises and the loss of partners and friends are challenges older people face. These events can be distressing and may lead to loneliness and insecurity. A companion animal may help address older people's emotional needs, allowing them to cope more easily with the challenges associated with growing older.

Pets as Therapy (PAT) is a free service provided by the Guide Dog Association of New South Wales and ACT. The program's primary goal is to fulfil the companionship needs of those who have reduced opportunities for social access. And what could be better than getting a big furry cuddle every day from a dog specially trained to look after you?

"Many of the people we assign PAT dogs to are aged over 50. Their children have left home and they are living alone or with a spouse. Having a pet gives these people something to nurture and love. For example, they become more motivated and get exercise simply by taking the dog out for a walk," said the coordinator for the Pets and Therapy program, Terrie Jones.

One of the Pets as Therapy recipients is an elderly man who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, which proved so debilitating that he also developed depression. The depression worsened into agoraphobia: this once-happy man was now unable to leave his house. His family, who felt that having a dog would re-spark his interest in life, contacted the Guide Dog Association.

The day this gentleman got his PAT dog, his neighbours saw him outside his house for the first time in over a year. He has now recovered from his agoraphobia and his depression has transformed into a new zeal for life.

"Dogs can provide wonderful benefits, both physically and mentally," said Terrie. "Studies also show that pets are psychologically important to the elderly. They help stimulate socialisation by providing a topic of conversation with others where stories of their pets are shared.

"Having something to look after and care for motivates people. What we may not be inclined to do for ourselves - like exercising - we will do for a dog."

The PAT program started in 1986, when the Guide Dog Association had an excess of dogs - the ones who do



Joyce Scott and her lovely Pets as Therapy companion, Cindy.

not pass guide dog training. They realised that because labradors and golden retrievers are such loyal and loving dogs, they could be a good therapeutic tool for the elderly and people with disabilities. It takes a special dog to become a PAT companion. "All dogs undergo a temperament test before they are accepted into the program," said Terrie. "Fortunately, the qualities that make a good guide dog do not make a good PAT dog and vice-versa."

The aim of the program is to help those who are sick or lonely re-gain their confidence and interest in the world around them. Terrie assesses each applicant very carefully. "I visit the applicant, tell them what's involved in looking after a dog and gather as much information about

them as I can. I find out if there are any health issues, such as if they've had a stroke, so their dog can be trained to meet their needs," explained Terrie.

Dogs are chosen carefully for each applicant. "We match older people with mature, well-settled dogs. Dogs with a soft temperament are matched with disabled people."

All PAT dogs are given basic obedience training and are then trained to suit the applicant's level of mobility and physical strength. For example, a dog may be trained to walk beside a person who uses a wheelchair, walking stick or walking frame. Dogs assigned to elderly people are taught to walk slowly, without pulling on anything except heart-strings!

As well as the Pet program, The Guide Dog Association of New South Wales and ACT provides services to help people with vision impairment and place guide dogs. They also provide other types of orientation and navigation services for those who are sighted.

If you think that you or someone you know might benefit from a Pets as Therapy dog, contact any of the service providers: The Guide Dog Association of New South Wales (02) 9922 4211.

The Guide Dog Association is funded by donations from general public and corporate sponsorships. Pet owners are encouraged to donate money to the cause. You can also make a difference by becoming a 'puppy raiser', by community support or fundraising events. For more information, contact individuals in the list below.

To find out how you can help, contact the Guide Dog Association of New South Wales (02) 9922 4211.

If you have a pet that has helped you find your way, please let us know. We would like to hear from you.

Please send your article to:

**Senior
PO Box
Canberra
ACT**

Alternatively you can contact us on (02) 6280 2430 (marked 'Attention') or email kaylee.close@canberra.com.au

Deliciously Healthy
The Heart Foundation's new cookbook, **Deliciously Healthy**, proves that flavoursome, irresistible meals can be healthy.

Are you Willing

**I SHOULD HAVE HAD ON
A LONG TIME AGO**