Pet Therapy: Why Dogs Really Are Man’s Best Friend

When Rose met Carli, you could see the joy in her eyes. As Pat said goodbye to Jin Jin, there was no denying a new friend had been made. These are just a couple of the matches made recently at Caregiver Canines, a free program offered to the home-bound elderly of Ocean County, New Jersey by the non-profit organization Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey.

In recent years, pet therapy has become widely popular in hospitals and nursing homes. The Caregiver Canines program is a new addition to the seventeen year-old organization. Now visits are being made to homebound seniors and their caregivers in their own homes as a method of coping with isolation, stress, and loneliness. There’s nothing quite like the bond between a dog and his owner but unfortunately, for many seniors in our area the responsibility of owning a dog is just too much. Caregiver Canines and their handlers make weekly or bi-weekly visits to seniors they have been matched with in their area. Running just over a year now, Caregiver Canines have reached dozens of seniors in the community.

Ocean County, NJ is home to the greatest concentration of senior citizens in the state. It is second in the nation to Dade County, Florida. Some of the people enrolled in the program have family that live far away, yet others never had children. The visit with the Caregiver Canine pair can sometimes be the only social interaction that they participate in all week. Some of those receiving pet therapy just look forward to a wagging tail and a friendly smile while others witness a real personality change in their spouse. When therapy dog Gracie Vegas visited Glen for the first time, his wife Sophia said that was the most her husband, who has Alzheimer’s disease, had spoken all day. Another couple, Connie and Leonard (96 and 102 years old) have been receiving pet therapy visits for about six months now. Of their on-going pet therapy visits, Connie says, “Having visits from Denise and Nutmeg just make my day. I look forward to their visits, they make me happy and I enjoy their company. My whole spirit changes when Denise and Nutmeg come to visit.”

The Caregiver Canine handlers are always surprised by the impact they make with their dog. While often saddened by the degree of isolation of their clients or by the extent of various illnesses, many come away knowing they’ve made a difference in someone’s day. Denise, a Caregiver Canine handler says, “I feel truly blessed to be a part of it. All the people involved are so caring and committed to the program.”

If you own a pet therapy dog or if you or someone you know would enjoy a visit from Caregiver Canines, please contact Jessica Pierro, Caregiver Canine Manager at 732-505-2273 ext. 202, or e-mail info@caregivervolunteers.org.

For more information visit Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey on the web at www.caregivervolunteers.org.