



CAVALIERS IN ACTION

GCCR's Own Therapy Ambassadors

Part Two

by Michelle Riportella

Imagine your child, family member, friend, young or old, lying in a hospital bed, saddened, distraught, and very sickly, and you're sitting there feeling helpless because there is nothing you can do to help them feel better. Now imagine a Cavalier walking into their hospital room and your loved one sits up and smiles. That is the impact of a Therapy Dog.

How does it all happen? Just ask Sue Burrows, one of GCCR's own and owner to Maggie (Tricolor), Ridley (Blenheim), and Abbey (Tricolor). It all started just by attending an obedience class where she learned about therapy dogs – and now the rest is history....



Ridley (Blenheim)
and Abbey (Tri),
Therapy Dogs

Soon after her retirement, Sue became a volunteer for Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy, with Ridley and Abbey as her new Cavalier therapy dogs in tow. Sue and her team have been volunteering for Rainbow Animal Assisted Therapy for over nine years now, and through their work they have had the privilege of touching thousands of lives through this great organization.

Rainbow is the oldest and largest animal therapy organization in the Chicago Metropolitan area. They have 270 teams that consist of handlers plus therapy dogs that reach out to over 197 ongoing programs. Their volunteers visit over 100 Chicago area facilities, including 46 schools and 22 hospitals, like Lurie Children's Hospital and Advocate Lutheran General.

It's important to know there are two types of therapy the dogs can perform. One type is "visitation therapy" which includes the typical one-on-one interaction with the dogs (petting, bed cuddling, etc.). The other type is called "animal assisted therapy", which includes canine participation and support during physical therapy sessions and other therapeutic procedures. Both types of therapy dogs must be trained, certified and registered with one of the many national or even local therapy dog organizations.

Sue explains her therapy work and the special bond she shares with her own dogs. Even though two of her three dogs are therapy dogs (and she loves them all equally!), her Abbey is the one that truly was made for this job. With the therapy experiences Sue has shared with Abbey over the years, they have formed a very special bond and closeness she does not experience with her other Cavaliers. It's as if they can "read" each other, understanding exactly what needs to be done for the patient. Sue explains they have a "working partner relationship". It is a remarkable experience and Sue says that she could not imagine a better therapy dog than a Cavalier.

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For therapy teams like Sue's, hospitals generally allow the dogs to visit medical and surgical wards, pediatrics, geriatric, oncology, hospice and palliative care units, adolescent psychiatric units, grief therapy programs and outpatient centers. Sue's team is also a part of a Crisis Response team with the Chicago Metropolitan Red Cross offering assistance to first responders for disasters and their victims.

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Of course, Sue has many wonderful stories to share – especially those that include children who experience the power of the therapy dog firsthand. No one truly realizes what an animal can do to help someone, especially children, in their recovery process. Many times a great therapy dog can make these tiny patients do more than anyone else can. With the help of her own therapy dogs, Sue has seen kids get out of bed, sit up, walk the hallways, eat, drink, and be able to start their recovery from their disabling illnesses – what an amazing reward!

Over the last few months, I have been lucky enough to experience firsthand the incredible impact Sue and her therapy dog, Abbey, made on one of our very close family friends.



Jessica and Abbey

Jessica Amanti, 15 year-old daughter of one of our best friends, was diagnosed with Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia last October. Sue and Abbey visited Jessica on the Pediatric Oncology floor at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital. Jess (as we call her), lay in bed very sick from her chemo treatments and very depressed, feeling that her whole world had been turned upside down with this diagnosis.

When Abbey jumped in bed with Jessica, her father told me that she lit up for the first time in days. Even though Jessica was too weak to do much more than simply pet Abbey, her visit made a huge difference. Jess told me about her experience, saying “The visit I had with that Cavalier made me feel like I wasn’t just there for the pain, and I actually felt human again. I felt emotions I hadn’t felt in a while. Abbey was so loving, caring, and listened to me and my heart.” Jess describes it as one of her top ten best experiences ever. Jess continues her treatment at Advocate Lutheran General and hopes to see Abbey again.

Sue has often run into former patients she visited with her therapy Cavaliers who will tell her “Thank you so much for what you and your dogs did for me”, or “I remember you”. Sue also tells a story of a girl who fell in love with Abbey. Years later, this girl ran into Sue and showed her a picture of her new dog – who is the spitting image of Abbey! These dogs provide patients with a calm and a peace they have not been able to feel – all by just holding or petting them.

Sue describes her volunteer therapy dog work as the best way she can provide service to others. In Sue’s own words, “It is an honor, a blessing, and a privilege. I may be the one holding the leash, but it is my dog that does the real work in assisting these patients to get better. This has been the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my entire life.”

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Sue, you and your Cavaliers contribute a wonderful service for those in need. You are truly an inspiration and we hope that others will follow the path you have so lovingly established. GCCR is so lucky to have you! Please check out the following link to see Sue and her therapy Cavaliers in action..... <http://wgntv.com/2015/01/29/885197/>