



**FROM: Cancer Fighters Thrive, Summer 2009**

**Man's Best Friend**

Like many of her busy hospital colleagues, Tori is often stopped in the hallway, as she travels between patient visits. Though other staff members and visitors know that Tori has a tight schedule to keep, they can't resist the chance to stop her to say hello and perhaps scratch her behind the ears. And if this doesn't sound like a typical hospital staff interaction, that's because Tori isn't a typical hospital staff member—she is in fact an 18-month-old Australian Labradoodle and a certified therapy dog.

Since joining handler Cynthia Ingram, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) coordinator at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Zion, Illinois, in January 2008 to launch the hospital's AAT program, affable Tori has brought smiles and eased anxiety for patients and their loved ones as they face challenging times. "When she walks in, you can just see people relax," says Cynthia of Tori's immediate effect on those she visits. Cynthia describes the transformation in patients and their loved ones as they gather around the dog to pet her and peer into her kind eyes as "almost like magic," they focus on their new furry friend, rather than on their worries.

According to the National Cancer Institute, AAT is being studied among cancer patients for its ability to relieve distress. A 2008 study, for example, observed that patients undergoing treatment for cancer who visited with dogs viewed their health as improved compared with their counterparts who did not interact with dogs. In addition to the emotional benefits of patient/dog interactions, other areas of ongoing research include the effects on stress and immune responses among patients during cancer treatment.

The Delta Society ([deltasociety.org](http://deltasociety.org)), an organization dedicated to improving people's health and well-being through positive interactions with animals, describes AAT as a "goal-directed intervention in which an animal that meets specific criteria is an integral part of the treatment process." This means that a certified therapy animal interacts with a patient, with the goal of addressing specific issues, such

as anxiety or depression. The Delta Society also describes the more casual “meet and greet” practices known as animal-assisted activities, where the interaction does not aim to reach such specific goals but nonetheless is a joyful encounter during an otherwise rough time.

Cynthia explains that while Tori’s schedule is often unpredictable due to high demands for her time and special requests, a more-or-less typical day begins as soon as she enters the halls for her Monday-through-Thursday rounds. “It takes us a long time to get where we need to go,” Cynthia says of the attention Tori draws en route to appointments. Once they’ve greeted admirers, Cynthia checks a criteria log to make sure she and Tori avoid any patients who have medical conditions that prohibit interaction with Tori. Reasons why an individual would not be able to see Tori include low white blood cell and platelet levels (below 2,000 and 50,000 respectively), severe infections, and open wounds. She also can’t visit patients in the stem cell or intensive care units; she does call on caregivers of patients in those units, however, who are often anxious about their loved ones’ condition.

They then visit patients who are able to see Tori and want to see her (though “more patients want to see her than don’t,” says Cynthia). Each interaction begins and ends with hand sanitizer, which Cynthia carries and offers to all –patients, family, friends, and staff—who stroke or cuddle with Tori. From here every visit is unique, as Cynthia and Tori meet the individual needs of each of Tori’s friends. Often, Cynthia says, “Tori goes up to the bed so the patient can pet her.” Or, if a laugh is needed, “sometimes we do tricks for the patient.” And for patients who are missing their own pets, just being with Tori brings them a sense of home.

Tori’s rounds also include the waiting room in the new patient clinic, where she provides a friendly welcome, and the waiting rooms for imaging and surgery, where anxious patients wait for results and friends and family wait while a loved one undergoes surgery. In any of these places and circumstances, Cynthia says that even a five-minute visit offers comfort and a positive way to direct attention away from fear and worries—quick encounters that she says can change a person’s day for the better.

Versatile Tori has also been called upon for CTCA for concerns unrelated to cancer diagnosis. When Gail Clark, medical staff manager for CTCA, experienced a traumatic dog attack, she looked to the therapy dog to make sure she didn’t develop a lingering fear of dogs. As a life-long dog lover, the thought that she might become wary of canines was a major concern. “I wanted to make sure I had initial contact right away after it (the attack) happened,” explains Gail, whose extensive facial injuries required plastic surgery.

Visits with Tori did more than just assure Gail that she wouldn’t develop a fear of dogs; the gentle canine helped her realize just how comfortable she could still be among four-legged friends when, soon after her surgery and still feeling a lot of pain, Tori gently licked Gail’s injured face. Because coming face-to-face with a dog was, as Gail says, “as close as I can come to that bad incident,” she was absolutely certain at the moment that, thanks to Tori’s friendship, she would continue to enjoy the companionship of dogs without apprehension.

Each of Tori’s interactions with patients and caregivers is intensely personal, making the nature of her work and its benefits hard to summarize. What can be agreed upon, however, is that Tori’s presence at CTCA is undeniably special. Patients tell Cynthia that among the many ways they are cared for, spending time with Tori is one of their favorites.



This employee experienced a traumatic dog attack and requested visits from Tori soon afterwards to ease her recovery. As a lifelong dog lover, she wanted to be sure she wasn't left with a lingering fear of dogs. When Tori gently licked Gail's still-painful injured face soon after her surgery, Gail was certain that Tori's friendship would make it possible for her to continue enjoying the companionship of dogs without apprehension

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### **WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A THERAPY DOG**

Therapy dogs don't get by on charm alone. In January 2008 Tori started puppy class, which was followed by obedience training. She then attended advanced obedience training, earned certification as a "canine good citizen" by participating in the American Kennel Club's Canine Good Citizen® class, and finally advanced to the Delta Society's animal-assisted therapy class. In November 2008 Tori and Cynthia were certified as a Pet Partners® team through the Delta Society so that they could provide animal-assisted therapy.

Tori also has a routine that keeps her in shape---clean and healthy---for patient visits. According to Cynthia, Tori has a veterinary checkup every six months, is brushed daily, and is bathed (including maintenance like nail trimming) regularly. She is also outfitted with her Delta Society vest, which identifies her as a therapy dog.



Jim met Tori in the infusion center as he was receiving chemotherapy. Sometimes he just sat and petted her for comfort. He also allowed himself to be distracted from his treatment by enjoying Tori's tricks, such as the "high ten" she is doing here. Jim's wife also had fun seeing her husband enjoying time with Tori.



Ed and his wife are big fans of Tori. When this picture was taken, Ed was experiencing medical complications that prevented him from traveling back to his home state. Since he was too weak to come to the hospital to see Tori, Cindy brought Tori to his hotel to visit there. Ed found this particularly comforting as he was missing his dogs at home and already had a special relationship with Tori. Ed's wife also felt comforted to see her husband soaking up Tori's unconditional love.





Rebekah's dad was in the hospital long-term for a stem cell transplant, so Rebekah had lots of time to fill during her days there. She and her mom soon made friends with Tori, who visited them often. Sometimes Rebekah and Tori would play right outside the stem cell unit, and her dad would watch them through the window since Tori was not allowed in the unit.



Rebekah celebrated her 6<sup>th</sup> birthday at the hospital, and the staff threw her a surprise birthday party that included a personalized play date with Tori in the fitness center. You can see she was proud to have learned how to get Tori to sit on command. She also loved playing ball with Tori in the fitness center, which she did on her birthday.



Our nursing staff tells us they love having Tori here, both because they witness her helping their patients feel better and because she also offers comfort and pleasure to the staff. One nurse said, "We just love her! She is so calm! She'll give you a lick and a kiss here and there. We really enjoy her, and the nurses all come over and pet her."