

Canine Collaborators

by Laura Marjorie Miller
photography by John Russell

Pediatric outpatient rehabilitation therapy is effective and fun with Delta Pet Therapy's furry volunteers

Carol Monger and Jedi work with Dovie Harrison, with assistance from occupational therapist Lindsey Ham.

A frustrated Dovie Harrison struggles to pull herself upright, as her physical therapist, Heidi Kessler, cheers her on.

But when a butterfly-eared black-and-white dog named Jedi bounds into the room, Dovie's face lights up, the tension vanishing, and she is suddenly infused with energy. Without realizing it, the almost 5-year-old is sitting up straight as she reaches for her fluffy friend.

Jedi's human partner, Carol Monger, encourages Dovie to speak commands to the dog.

"Do you want him to get on the table? OK – say, 'Go table!'"

"Go table!" commands Dovie. Jedi jumps up and stands patiently as Dovie brushes him and feeds him snacks, suddenly forgetting that, for her, such simple tasks can be a challenge.

Jedi and Monger, a retired physical therapist, are part of Vanderbilt Volunteer Services' Delta Pet Therapy program, a national program that registers humans and their animals to assist in therapy scenarios designed by licensed practitioners. The animals in the program do more than just cheer up patients (although they perform that important function, too) – they are an integral part of the physical activity in a patient's healing process.

Watching Jedi arrive for his regular Wednesday session at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt Health One Hundred Oaks' Rehabilitation Services is like observing a celebrity arrive on the red carpet. The tiny, chipper Papillion instantly is swarmed by children who want to pet him, scratch his ears and play fetch. But Jedi treats each child like *they* are the real celebrity, which to him, they are. He makes his way through the waiting area, playing with children in spontaneous and informal interactions, which the Delta program calls

"animal-assisted activity." Then it is off to the rehab clinic's gymnasium to get down to business: "animal-assisted therapy," which is goal-directed and an integral part of patients' individual healing programs.

Two-year-old Rowan Wilkinson pushes Jedi in his cart and pets him.

"Rowan has her sessions on Wednesdays," said her father, Thomas, looking on. "He is here when we are here. She loves to feel his ears and his tail." For children with sensory diagnoses, like Rowan, whose eyesight is limited, interacting with an animal – stroking fur or allowing the dog to lick her hand – teaches sensory integration.

Does having Jedi involved in her therapy make a difference?

"Oh yes," Thomas Wilkinson said. "She is motivated completely differently by a dog."



Dovie Harrison and Jedi.

Interacting with an animal offers a vast field of possibilities for therapy. Actions that many of us take for granted – like brushing fur, breaking apart a dog biscuit, opening a packet of string cheese, screwing the lid off of Jedi's peanut butter jar or water thermos and then feeding him – require fine motor skills that involve coordination and precision.

Working with a dog trains gross motor skills – larger body movement of big limbs and muscles – as well. Best of all, animal-assisted therapy keeps ordinary physical therapy tasks vital and interactive instead of rote and repetitive. For example, throwing a ball five times while playing catch with a dog is the same as raising your arm five times, it's just more fun to do. Learning to walk backwards is more enjoyable when you can ask the dog to sit and stay while you move backwards, then call him to you and eventually reward him with a treat.

Dovie's trip around the gym's track belly-first on a flat cart is a challenge for her tiny muscles, but you wouldn't know it by watching her. She is filled with glee as first she races Jedi, then allows him onto her back for a ride.

When their therapy involves a dog, children with cognitive diagnoses learn to tune in to a larger living environment outside of themselves and to interact and respond to it in ways that are joyful and nonjudgmental. They can train their attention by counting jumps and their organizational skills by creating games for the dog.

"It makes 100 percent difference to have another motivator," said Ashley Schilling, Rowan's therapist. "It's a fantastic adjunct to therapy."

"Pet therapy works well for the children," Kessler said, "because it motivates them to move or do an activity without

thinking that they are working. Most of the kids coming in at least want to throw a ball for the dogs or give them a treat. Children that are very hesitant to try new things also have the opportunity to interact with the dogs and play.”

Monger travels with Jedi’s retrofitted cart of toys and games, a variety of apparatuses that stealthily improve motor skills: clips for his fur; his leash with its clasp; a little safari vest that she made for him, which is covered by pockets that fasten with zippers and buttons where she can hide treats for children to find and give to him.

“For a child with a disability, being able to take care of Jedi’s needs – such as a drink of water, brushing him or going for a walk – is esteem-building,” she said. “This is how kids learn – by experimenting with their environment and by playing.”

Monger continually improvises based on her 30 years as a licensed physical therapist as well as with the tools at hand.

“What you can do is limitless,” she said. “Jedi can be worked into just about any skill the client and therapist are working on. The children are having so much fun they don’t realize how hard they are working.”

Jedi has been a therapy dog for four of his five years. Dogs have to be 1 year old before they can enter the program. Jedi might be the smallest dog on Vanderbilt’s Delta team – which also includes labradors, golden retrievers, Weimaraners and a Great Dane – but he has an impressive repertoire of agility skills and is a model of patience.

“The process of becoming Delta pet registered is very rigorous,” said Laurie Kush, director of volunteers at One Hundred Oaks. “It has to be. We want to make sure that both ends of the leash are trained, insured and evaluated regularly. The pet owners have to be re-evaluated by the Delta Society every two years. It requires several months of work and a really deep commitment.”

Delta was founded in 1977 by a veterinarian named Leo Bustad and other veterinarians and human health workers with



Travis Frierson, 10, takes a closer look at Gilda, who along with handler Sarah Rizhaupt assists with pediatric occupational therapy. Photo by Joe Howell

the intention of researching the positive benefits of interaction between animals and humans. Delta’s Pet Partners program of human and animal teams began in 1990.

Vanderbilt University Medical Center currently has Pet Partner opportunities in 12 different clinics, and a plan to do a research study involving the Delta program at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt is in the works.

Delta teams also serve at hospitals, nursing homes, hospices and schools, aiding in physical and occupational therapy and socialization.

Since Delta registers not only dogs, but also llamas and rabbits, be on the lookout for a reportedly dog-sized rabbit on

a leash, which will be joining the therapy staff next season, according to Kush.

“Our aim and Delta’s aim is, above all, to improve people’s health and well-being through service interaction,” she said.

Every human involved with pet therapy attests to the passion required to do it, as well as the deep reward it brings.

“It always amazes me how the dogs adapt and develop a special sense for what is needed in such specialized settings,” said Melinda Whitley, VUMC’s Delta liaison. “It happens all the time and is no coincidence – it’s part of the special joy I have when volunteering with my own dog. I think every handler would tell you the same thing.” ●



Mary Henderson Kirkland (far left); her mother, Harriet Smiley Henderson; and a driver. Image courtesy of Vanderbilt University Special Collections & University Archives

Looking Back

There wasn’t much in the personalities of James Hampton Kirkland and Mary Henderson to suggest a good match. He was one of seven children raised by a widowed mother in genteel poverty in South Carolina. Serious, frugal and disciplined, Kirkland graduated college at 18, earned his Ph.D. in classical languages from the University of Leipzig at 25 and was named Vanderbilt’s second chancellor in 1893 at the ripe age of 33.

She was the daughter of a prominent Knoxville lawyer and had grown up among wealth in an active, even frivolous social circle. Educated in Boston and in Europe, she enjoyed parties and card games, lavish dinners and the theater and participated in annual shopping excursions to Atlanta and New York. But this daughter of Tennessee society immediately charmed the young chancellor when the two met at a Nashville dinner party in 1895.

They began an earnest courtship, documented in a series of poetic and sentimental letters. In them, she voiced her reservations about taking on the responsibilities of a chancellor’s wife. He eased her concerns by promising to relax more under her influence. Their relationship blossomed in the spring and summer of 1895 and culminated in a huge, well-publicized and expensive wedding in Knoxville that November. Vanderbilt students tried, in vain, to get a free holiday to celebrate the occasion.

The Kirklands’ marriage proved a happy one. She embraced her role as first lady, speaking to literary societies, helping to found the Vanderbilt Women’s Club and hosting the steady flow of important visitors to campus. She retained her expensive tastes, and in ways not to offend the chancellor’s pride, her family aided the couple financially; as a wedding gift, they received a horse and fine carriage.

In domestic life, Kirkland found respite from his many duties as chancellor. He tended his vegetable garden, hybridized iris and enjoyed hiking, hunting and fishing. Their only child, Elizabeth, was born in 1897, to the delight of students and the continuing adoration of her parents. The couple remained very close, as affectionate years later as adolescent sweethearts, through the remainder of Kirkland’s long tenure as chancellor and until his death in 1939. ●

| by Kara Furlong

Source: *Gone with the Ivy* by Paul K. Conkin