

# Off Lead & Animal Behavior

The Magazine Dedicated to  
How Dogs Think, Feel, and Learn!

Volume 10 Edition 4 • Winter 2009

[www.Off-Lead.com](http://www.Off-Lead.com)



Nominated for  
Best Special Interest Magazine  
in 2009 by the  
Dog Writers Association of America

*Martin Deeley's*  
**Puppy  
Retrieving**

**Canine  
Influenza:**  
*An Emerging Threat*

*Gary Wilkes'*  
**Playgroup  
Basics**





By Janet Velenovsky

# THERAPY DOGS

**F**rom very early on, I loved sharing my Golden, *Kaizen*, with other people. Most people who met him oohed and aahed at his gorgeous chestnut fur and beautiful smile, and laughed at his friendly, goofy personality. Seeing this kind of response from folks is very rewarding to me. So it wasn't surprising that, as soon as I learned about the idea of using dogs therapeutically, I quickly decided Kai and I would train to become a therapy dog team.

We completed our training, met with a local evaluator for a national organization, and joined a group who had regular appointments scheduled at local adult retirement and nursing homes. The visits were very enjoyable and worthwhile to me, and we were repeatedly told our visits were beneficial to our "clients", the people we visited.

The 1980s and 90's were a time of scientific studies that proved the medical benefits

of spending time with a dog. Benefits included lowered blood pressure, improved triglycerides and cholesterol in pet owners, reduction of stress, improved feeling of well-being, and even a reduction for some patients in the need for pain medication.

Other studies proved the strength of the bond between people and their pets. Many people surveyed reported they felt a stronger bond with a pet than other family members. Other studies showed that children who owned dogs showed higher self-esteem and empathy than children without pets in the home.

Scientific studies brought credibility to the concept for medical professionals. The Delta Society ([www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)) has played a strong role in developing and promoting standards for training animal therapy teams, resulting in common acceptance for the concept of visiting therapy animals in hospitals.

Therapy dog teams were invited into hospitals, and even into intensive care units!

Once therapy dog teams were readily involved with medical care facilities, it was inevitable that other groups, organizations and industries would notice the good work being done and find ways to apply the benefits elsewhere.

You may also have an image of therapy dog visits as quiet gatherings at nursing homes --often less than an hour, very unstructured, low-key, pleasant outings. If you are a dog-handler team used to the excitement of agility or other activities, you might think this is too low-key for you.

I, myself, am a creature who enjoys variety and change. I like to find new challenges and reach out to new opportunities. So eventually, I began to look for new activities for Kai and myself. It didn't take long to find them.

I am happy to report

-- there's not just one kind of therapy dog anymore!

You may be aware many dog therapy teams also participate in reading and socialization programs at schools and libraries. Children who don't read well are often shy and hesitant to speak up in class. As kids read to these loving, non-judgmental creatures, their reading skills and enthusiasm for participating in school activities rise dramatically.

When reading is difficult for children, having the dog present reduces stress and adds a pleasant association with the task. I have watched quiet, sullen children open up in the presence of my second Golden, *Piper*. *Piper* elicits smiles, grins and giggles along with improvements in their reading skills. This type of work is rewarding for dogs and handlers who enjoy the higher energy level of children.

Always open to new opportunities, our next step was getting involved with Animal – Assisted Crisis Response. This more challenging level of therapy dog work utilizes dogs for emotional support during times of man-made or natural disasters, helping all those affected, from victims to family members to first responders and aid workers. Kai-zen and I were among a group invited by FEMA to visit Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina, with other members from the HOPE AACR organization ([www.hopeaacr.org](http://www.hopeaacr.org)).

AACR dogs must have very stable personalities and must be well-socialized to lots of modes of travel, many noisy and distracting environments, and elevated levels of stress, anxiety and emotions from our clients. In addition, the handlers in AACR work must be trained beyond the experience level of local social visits. Handlers need to understand how to do active listening and emotional support, be

prepared for serious emotional situations, and work within the framework of other crisis response organizations, such as the Red Cross and FEMA. We often joke that this is the “Ph.D.” of therapy work, since a dog needs to have a background and experience of basic therapy visitation, and must undergo additional screening, evaluation, and ongoing training to be involved in AACR work.

The crisis response dog team often works for a much longer day than the team making routine visits to locations in their hometown. In AACR, teams often spend several hours each day interacting with clients. Of course, our dogs get frequent breaks, but – especially when we travel to remote locations – we like to provide as much support as we can in the time we are onsite.

AACR therapy teams often travel to locations away from their hometowns to help in areas affected by fires, hurricanes, floods or earthquakes. Handlers should acclimate their dogs to various modes of travel to ensure their success in multiple parts of the country. The places we visit may provide challenges in housing, transportation, and other details of infrastructure.

The latest new frontier of therapy dog opportunity arises from the legal system. Therapy dogs are being used as advocates for children who need to testify in cases of violence they have either experienced or witnessed. In befriending and supporting these witnesses, the dogs often make it possible to obtain convictions or plea-bargains that otherwise wouldn't happen.

Another use for dogs is to provide a stress-reliever and motivation for people involved in drug rehabilitation. Court officials are finding this interaction leads to more cooperation and less anger in the participants.

Court approved therapy work involves similar “bomb-proofing” – preparing the dogs for as many types of people as possible. Since the dogs are likely to encounter all races and ethnicities, they should be well-socialized in preparation. Like the AACR dogs, court approved therapy dogs must be able to handle travelling to various courtrooms and encountering a variety of smells, sounds, and experiences. And like the reading program dogs, court dogs will have to be able to sit quietly for long periods without distracting the proceedings.

Dogs are already in use in court systems in New York, Texas, Florida, Maryland and Washington state. Handlers who are interested can find a good resource at [www.courthousedogs.com](http://www.courthousedogs.com).



*Therapy canines and their handlers from HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response arrive to comfort those affected by Hurricane Katrina.*

Isn't it wonderful to know that dogs and handlers with different interests and activity levels can find their own special niche with an appropriate therapy



activity? I hope you have as much fun as Kai, Piper, and I have had. Go out and do some good!

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Janet Velenovsky is a past-President of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC) and the Chair of its Human-Animal Mutualism division. Janet is a Certified Dog Behavior Consultant (CDBC) and a Therapy Animal Consultant (TAC) with IAABC.

Janet is also a Professional Member of APDT (Association of Pet Dog Trainers) and a Certified Training Partner of the Karen Pryor Academy. Janet is a graduate of Purdue University's 2004 DOGS Course, and holds a Counseling Certificate from the San Francisco SPCA's Academy for Dog Trainers.

Janet and her Golden Retriever, Piper, are currently registered with the Delta Society, a national therapy animal program, and Janet works locally and on a national level with HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response.

Janet also has a strong feline side; she's always been owned by cat(s) since the age of 6. She has a

special interest in finding ways to enrich the lives of indoor cats, and in helping owners understand the enigmatic feline. Janet is a co-creator of the patented Gentle Leader® "Come With Me Kitty" Cat Harness and Bungee Leash by Premier Pet Products. She plans to train her next kitties for therapy work!