

Client: Just the Positive, a lifestyle blog focused on positive body, mind, spirit
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Published at <https://justthepositive.com/blog/different-therapy>

Just the 'Paws'-itive: A Different Kind of Therapy



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April 15, 2019 18:46pm

“My favorite part of having a therapy dog? I don’t know, I guess I’d say that if it makes someone happy, then we’ve done our jobs.”
PETER MADDY

It’s story time at the [ReGenerations Adult Day Club](#) inside the Continuum in southwest Reno, and the usual suspects are in attendance. Babies and toddlers between 1 and 2 years old — all part of an early Head Start program — are at the front of the room sitting atop colorful blankets, and “grandparents” are seated throughout the room. To be clear, these are not the actual grandparents of the children, but instead, are the adult participants in the Adult Day Club, which pairs multiple generations together for structured interactions.

As a grandparent reads a book called “Sometimes I Feel Scared” to the surrounding children, one member of the audience is clearly more spirited than the rest. She’s fidgety, traveling from chair to chair clearly seeking attention, some would even say “frisky” — and her tail is wagging wildly.

Yes, this audience member is of the canine variety: Annie the Therapy Dog is her name, and she visits ReGenerations regularly to interact with toddlers and grands alike.

“Ooh, she smells like coconut,” one grandparent coos as she’s giving the miniature poodle some welcome behind-the-ear scratches. “How are you today, Annie?” she continues. Annie answers in the best way she knows how: tail wagging, gazing lovingly, attention centered on the vocalic cadence of the scratcher.

As the attention and loving lingers, Peter Maddy, Annie’s handler (or “human” as she might call him) continues to hold her in his arms so that this particular grandparent doesn’t have to support her weight. As story time progresses, most of the activity happens on the ground, as the children and grandparents alike pet and love on “Miss Annie” — as one particular older attendee calls her.

The Benefits of Therapy Dogs

Annie and Maddy are part of [Love on a Leash](#), a volunteer organization providing certification for therapy pets and dedicated to increasing public awareness of animal-assisted therapy.

The advantages of time spent with pets are well-documented, as [the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) suggests that pets can decrease cholesterol levels, blood pressure and feelings of loneliness.

According to [Paws 4 Love](#), another volunteer organization the pair works through, “Exposure to friendly pets can also play an important role in patient treatment and recovery by relieving feelings of loneliness and isolation thereby providing a distraction from persistent pain.”

For these reasons, Annie and Maddy visit the Continuum twice weekly.

“People come Wednesdays or Thursdays just to see Annie,” says Christina Reynolds, ReGenerations Director. “Some can’t have animals where they live, so this gives them an opportunity to hold her and experience the fun of being around a pet. We love having them come for visits.”

But this visit isn’t all that’s on Annie’s and Maddy’s weekly agenda, as he shares on this particular Thursday just prior to story time.

“We’re usually doing something about every day of the week,” he says. It soon becomes apparent that Maddy is a master at understatement, as he begins to list off the various destinations that he and Annie routinely visit.

“Mondays we’re with the DA’s (District Attorney’s) staff; a couple of times a month, we’re in veterans court, where we sit with vets before they go in; Mondays we also go to Willow

Springs; Tuesdays we're at 5 Star Assisted Living and Brookdale Memory Care; Wednesdays we're here and at Encompass Academy; Thursdays, here for story time; and Fridays we're at West Hills Hospital. I feel like I'm forgetting something. Oh yeah, we also visit the thrift stores in town — they love her there."

During the laundry list of locations, Annie jumps up on her human, paws playfully patting his lap. "She recognizes some of the place names as I'm saying them," he explains, as she's clearly excitedly triggered by something. "She loves visiting all of these places, and she definitely knows the words."

Peter Maddy's 'Why'

With so many weekly destinations, one would think that Maddy has been doing this all of his life. But in fact, it wasn't until the tragic death of Mike Landsberry — the popular Sparks Middle School teacher, coach and member of the Nevada Air National Guard killed in a school shooting in 2013 — that he thought about the prospect. His daughter-in-law's father was best friends with Mike, and he watched the grieving process through a very personal lens.

"People kept saying Annie had such a great temperament and would make an amazing therapy dog," he remembers. "I never thought about it until Mike's death."

Now Annie is registered for crisis response through Paws 4 Love, an organization that encourages literacy, volunteerism and well-being within the community through pet therapy.

"We've only had to do crisis response once this year — when a teacher in Incline Village passed away, we spent a couple hours in the elementary school visiting kids and teachers."

Annie was a rescue — "I've always had rescue dogs," Maddy says — and he estimates she's between 10 and 11 years old. In just a few weeks, on May 2, Maddy will celebrate his 10-year anniversary of being Annie's human.

"She is by far the smartest dog I've ever had," says Maddy, who is retired from employment (though his schedule would suggest otherwise). He still, however, holds an active real estate license. Before his career in real estate, he was a driver/handler and also an operations manager for FedEx, which is what initially brought him to Reno.

"My favorite part of having a therapy dog? I don't know, I guess I'd say that if it makes someone happy, then we've done our jobs."

He describes one particular recent visit.

“We got a call from West Hills last week — there were some kids quarantined with some kind of bug, and another guy was having a really hard time. We go there, they tell us the room numbers, and then we go for our visits. She was in there for about 20 minutes with the gentleman having a hard time, and he’s just sitting there patting her and talking to us. He got up, and said to us, ‘Thank you. This really helped.’ We left there knowing we had made a difference.”

He admits that the weight of the burdens carried by those he visits can be heavy.

“It can be a lot,” he says, also describing a trip to the Reno Gazette-Journal to visit reporters who had covered the 2017 Las Vegas shooting. “But you try not to let it get to you. It can be emotionally draining if you get too involved.”

A Snapshot of ‘Therapy’

Watching Maddy and Annie the Therapy Dog interact at the Continuum, their involvement is evident and appreciated. A group of four toddlers and a staff member are seated in a circle surrounding Annie, Maddy attached by a leash and sitting just above the group.

“She’s so cute!” shouts an overjoyed red-headed girl with a high ponytail and a Peppa Pig shirt, furiously petting Annie. Annie sits calmly, looking on, making frequent eye contact with Maddy.

The children go to leave, and the staff member directs them to “go give high fives” to the grandparents in the front row. Over toddlers Lucas, who gives one to Annie.

“This means so much to the kids and the grandparents alike,” Reynolds says. “We’re so lucky to have Peter and Annie come visit us.”

How You Can Help

- Pet a therapy dog the next time you see one at a hospital, in a group home or at the airport. And give thanks to the pet’s handler for volunteering time to the cause.
- Learn more about pet therapy (and the difference between therapy dogs, service dogs and emotional support animals) [here](#).
- Follow Annie the Therapy Dog on [Facebook](#).