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CREATURES COMFORT FURRY FRIENDS MARKING 100,000TH VISIT TO SICK, LONELY May 13, 2006

LINDA GOLDSTON, Mercury News

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"He's a role model for me," Makela said. "If I feel really down, all I have to do is think about Ralph."

Ralph is one of the canine volunteers with Furry Friends Pet Assisted Therapy Services, which will celebrate an impressive milestone today: 100,000 visits to hospitals, convalescent homes and children's shelters.

The all-volunteer, non-profit group has been bringing smiles to ill and lonely children and adults since 1983 through pet therapy.

More than 300 people share their pets -- dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, lizards, even a llama and a miniature horse -- with those in need of a smile or an encouraging nudge at hospitals and care homes in Santa Clara, San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties.

Most of the animal volunteers have all their limbs. Ralph is a favorite at Live Oak Adult Day Services at St. Jude's Episcopal Church in Cupertino because the seniors who go there all know about his successful battle against cancer.

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By Linda Goldston
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Jaime Hanjung Lee / Mercury News
Paul Cune and Bonnie Makela, both of Sunnyvale, pet Ralph while Don Reiser, also of Sunnyvale, pets "Rag" at the Live Oak Adult Care Services in Cupertino.
[More photos](#)



"They all saw his tumor and then saw him bounce right back after his leg was amputated," said Ralph's owner, Ellen Barker of Los Altos. "He was on his feet the next day."

When Ralph and two other dogs visited Live Oak this week, the seniors gathered in the sunny courtyard took turns petting their favorites. Makela and 82-year-old George Brown shared Ralph, while several others latched onto Prancer, an 8-year-old Dalmatian owned by Nancy Smith of San Jose.

"She's my Velcro dog," Smith said. "She just plants herself next to somebody."

Elan Winkler, vice president of Furry Friends, has been involved with the group for 10 years and recently assembled her favorite stories from visits to senior and youth facilities for a talk she gave on the benefits of pet therapy.

A visit to Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall a few years ago is foremost in her mind.

After watching her dog, Brittany, follow around a 10-year-old girl, Winkler went over to the child and said, "you must be pretty special for the dog to single you out like this." "I'm nothing special," the girl said.

"When I told her 'The dog thinks you are,' she started crying and hugging the dog. It was the first time somebody had said, 'You're special, you mean something.' "

Brittany, who died in 2002, also worked her magic at Eastfield Ming Quong, a residential home for emotionally disturbed children in Los Gatos.



"I wanted to do something to help the kids deal with Brittany's death, so I created some note cards with her picture on the front and a poem on the inside," Winkler said. "Several months later, a boy came up to me and said he still had the notecard next to his bed.

"Every night before he went to bed, he said a prayer to Brittany because she was his guardian angel."



Winkler now visits the adult day care center for seniors in Cupertino with Rain, a border collie who invariably ends up at the side of 73-year-old Joyce Gilbert of Sunnyvale.

"She reminds me of my dog, Cookie," said Gilbert, pulling her close. "I named her Cookie because she had all of these round spots on her."

The first visit Furry Friends made was to Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, and that's where the 100,000th visit will happen today.

In between, "there's been a lot of joy on a lot of children's and seniors' faces," Winkler said.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To help raise money for its operations, Furry Friends will host a walk-a-thon, "Diamonds in the Ruff" at Los Gatos Creek Park at 10 a.m. Sunday, May 21. Tickets are \$25 in advance, \$30 the day of the event.

For more information and to download a registration form, view www.furryfriends.org or call (877) 4FF-PATS or (877) 433-7287.