



therapy spotlight



Pet Partners Focus on Miniature Horses

“He hasn’t spoken to any of us all week.” This is what Pet Partners handler, Ellen, was told after she and her Miniature horse, Stormy, made a visit to Robert, a resident in an assisted living facility. As Stormy and Ellen approached Robert in the common room, he regarded them with some suspicion. Then his features softened as he reached for Stormy and began to stroke his soft nose. Robert then began to talk about how he had grown up on a farm and the horses he had loved as a child. “They weren’t silly little horses,” he said affectionately, gazing at Stormy, but he had loved riding through the woods by his house and relayed a story of helping deliver a colt one very cold morning, “who was probably bigger than Stormy will ever be.”

As the conversation drew to a close, Ellen thanked Robert for a nice chat and said they hoped to see him next time they visited.

Ellen, who has been volunteering with Stormy for 4 years, makes a point of visiting Robert each week. They discuss horses, the farrier that Robert loved to watch work, his childhood farm and occasionally, Robert makes a point of presenting Stormy with a carrot or apple slice before they end the visit.

What might seem like a simple act, sharing a beloved animal with another, can have profound implications. From lowering blood pressure and minimizing the perception of pain to dispelling loneliness and reducing stress, animal-assisted interventions – once known as ‘pet therapy’ – have become increasingly recognized as a way to improve human health and well-being. Pet Partners is the most prestigious national non-profit with more than 14,000 therapy teams across all 50 states. The majority of Pet Partners teams consists of a handler with a canine partner, however, equines – particularly minis – are becoming more and more popular as members of the Therapy Animal Program.

While performing therapy with your Mini may sound simple, it’s critical that Miniature therapy horses are well prepared and their handlers well trained for the work ahead. Like the early therapy dogs of the 1990’s,

people who haven’t had firsthand experience with minis are watching carefully to see if these animals truly are safe for visits in hospitals, nursing homes and schools. Without a professional approach, minis may have challenges accessing the wide range of facilities where their visits could benefit many in need.

For this reason, Pet Partners requires training for handlers and sets high standards of professionalism for their members. There are exacting expectations for the animals from resilience to grooming. All Pet Partners therapy horses are potty trained to meet infectious disease control standards for healthcare facilities. Teams must be re-evaluated every two years to demonstrate their skills and ongoing continuing education is available for handlers on topics ranging from best practices when interacting with individuals with dementia to training on infection prevention and control.

If volunteering with your Miniature horse sounds interesting to you, be thoughtful about what your mini would think. Animals that are well suited to therapy work have an affiliative nature. Ask yourself, “Does my mini like to meet and interact with new people?” If you’re not sure, set up some brief opportunities for socializing with others and watch carefully to see how your mini responds. One of the core tenets of the Pet Partners Therapy Animal Program is animal

welfare. Safe and effective visits occur when we don’t force an animal to participate in an activity we, as the handler, have chosen. The most successful therapy animal teams have animals that welcome, not just tolerate, visiting and handlers who are consistently acting as an advocate for their animal, guiding interactions and making choices in their mini’s best interests.

While many of us intuitively understand the benefits of positive interactions with pets in our lives, an emerging body of research is recognizing the impact therapy animals can have on health and well-being. Whether a therapy animal visit offers an antidote for loneliness, lessens someone’s worry, anxiety and pain, or motivates them in their recovery, as a volunteer you can positively influence the lives of those in your community through sharing your Miniature horse.

In 2017, Pet Partners will begin a study project to determine if the organization can expand internationally in a sustainable way. Both in the US and internationally, existing online education is open to anyone interested in learning more or becoming a better educated handler. To register for an online course or to start the process to register as a team in the US with the premiere therapy animal program, visit www.petpartners.org. 🐾