

“Touching Hearts, Changing Lives”

By Mia DiBenedetto

Dogs and handlers can now earn an American Kennel Club title for their work as a Therapy team!

The American Kennel Club has announced a new title program designed to recognize AKC dogs and their owners who have given their time and helped people by volunteering as a therapy dog and owner team.

The AKC Therapy Dog program awards an official AKC title to dogs who have worked to improve the lives of the people they have visited.

The AKC (THD) title can be earned by dogs who have been certified by AKC recognized therapy dog organizations and have performed 50 or more community visits.

This is a wonderful move, and I would strongly suggest that poodle owners who have a dog capable of doing therapy work to give it a try!

I have been involved as a therapy team at Hasbro Children’s Hospital in Providence, R.I. for over four years now. The satisfaction I have received by participating in this program is like none other! Ten is an accomplished performance dog, and while the competitions are thrilling, therapy work offers us a chance to ‘give back’ by helping others. To experience first-hand how an animal can enrich our lives and those who are really in need is important. There is nothing as rewarding for me than to see how Ten brightens the day of some very sick and unhappy children.

As soon as Ten enters the child’s room, the patient is grinning ear-to-ear. And more often than not, the parents and staff have the same reaction. It’s amazing to me to see how excited the children become when she appears.

On one of our first visits to Hasbro, a girl about 7 years old, who was crying when we entered the room, soon lit up when she saw us. Her mother said she had been waiting since early morning for the ‘dog visit.’ She wanted Ten to jump on her bed, and as soon as she did, the child quickly buried her head into Ten’s pompadour, kissed and kissed and kissed her, saying, “I Love You, I Love You, and I Love You!” Wow what a feeling that was for me—and for Ten too.

I am not sure why we are such a draw to everyone. Perhaps it’s that most children tell me that they do not own a dog. So many families are not able to have pets and therefore Ten is a real novelty. And perhaps because she is a poodle, she may look like an animated stuffed animal to some children. Petting her just seems to relax the kids. Everyone comments on how fluffy she is, and while most adults say they have only seen “small” poodles (Ten is a Standard), almost everyone recognizes the breed!

And even for those kids who do have a dog at home, they are always quick to tell me about their dog. I have had some of the hospital therapists tell me that the dog visits are a natural opening to letting the children talk about something they love, and helping them to forget their pain, even for a while.

In addition to our regular hospital rounds, over the past year, Ten and I have been involved with visiting children with autism. The hospital has received very positive results from this enriched therapy and they are anxious to have the children receive a visit from a pet therapy team.

Not all therapy dogs can make such visits. It takes an exceptionally calm pet to handle this situation. On occasion, the child can be very threatening to the dog—often raising their voices very loud and running toward the animal quickly. It always amazes me to see how an animal can sense they are in a very different situation and need to behave accordingly. Doctors, nurses and therapists are continuing to tell us how much of a difference the pet therapy program has been in their patient's treatment. Just the slightest recognition by the child is seen as very positive results.

I think as dog owners we take our dog's unconditional love for granted. Not so for dogs. They are always happy to see us, to be touched, kissed and hugged and to always pay attention to our needs.

I know there are many poodles serving as therapy dogs, which is a great testament to the breed. In our case, Ten is a Master Hunter dog, capable of extremely physical accomplishments in the field, but she is just as comfortable lying quietly next to a sick child. I am very proud that Ten has received a THD title. What more can I say about these wonderful canines!

Get out and enjoy your dog and learn what a great feeling it is to give back to others!
An experience you will never regret.

To learn more about the THD title log on to the AKC web site.
<http://www.akc.org/akctherapydog/>

There are several AKC approved organizations that will help you to get your dog ready for therapy work. Here are a few:

The Delta Society Pet Partners
<http://www.deltasociety.org/>

Therapy Dogs Inc.
<http://www.therapydogs.com/>

Therapy Dogs International
<http://www.tdi-dog.org/>

