

'They know who needs help most'

Dogs really *are* our best friends, especially when they're comforting patients in nursing homes and hospitals. With her dog Hudson by her side, former nurse **SHARON STEWART, 54**, founded Paws Pet Therapy to help those in need of puppy love

HOUNDS OF LOVE
Sharon's dogs provide unconditional affection

Anyone who's ever loved a pet knows just how much joy and love their companionship gives. Sharon Stewart decided to harness her dog's feelgood factor by establishing Paws Pet Therapy.

"I was a registered nurse for 30 years and I used to buzz around all day giving out pills and filling in paperwork," Sharon says. "I'd stop by an elderly patient and see a photo next to the bed of a beautiful young woman standing next to a handsome soldier. I'd think, *I'd love to stand here and talk to you about that photo*, but I didn't have time. Now I can sit down with patients, ask them if they'd like to pat my golden retriever Hudson, then ask them about their photos, or the pets they've had, or their grandkids. You just see a light go on. It's an incredible feeling."



Turn the page



Before Sharon officially founded Paws Pet Therapy (or Paws for short) in 2012, she'd take her late Siberian husky Zep to visit nursing homes.

"The patients just loved it – they'd all look forward to Wednesdays when Zep came in. I thought there could be other people out there who'd benefit from a visit from a therapy dog, certainly in my area, so Paws launched officially," says Sharon, who also owns a Jack Russell terrier named Ringo (who works in mental health and disability units) and golden retriever puppy Hugo – a Paws pup-in-waiting.

"I started off with three volunteers and we visited three facilities – now we have 60 volunteers, visit close to 50 facilities in NSW – including nursing homes, public and private hospitals, mental health and rehab units, disability groups, palliative care centres and schools – and we have another 40 facilities on the waiting list. The dogs just go in with their understanding and unconditional love, and help wherever they're needed."



'They have a way of knowing how to help; it's almost as if they see into the soul'



Any breed over 12 months old can become a therapy dog. "Our smallest dog is a Pomeranian called Bambi, we have two Chihuahuas – Benjy and Tyson – and our 'big bear' Molly is a Newfoundland,"

Sharon says. "We want our dogs to be themselves, so while they need to have basic obedience skills we rely on their natural enthusiasm, intuition and love of people."

Trained and vetted [no pun intended] volunteers visit facilities of their choice with their own dogs. An average visit lasts between 60 to 90 minutes. A visit can be a one-on-one interaction with a patient, a group session or a cuddle with a staff member.

"The dogs dictate the visit. They're always on a lead but they go where they're needed. It's uncanny how they will always zero in on whoever most needs a pat or a cuddle that day. It's not just the patients who benefit," Sharon explains, adding that the dogs break down barriers wherever they go.

"I visited a care home where a young man with Down syndrome usually spent his time in the computer room and didn't want to interact with anyone," she recalls. "But for some reason, he looked at Zep, Zep looked at him and two minutes later he was down on the floor patting the dog."

Sharon says taking a dog to a nursing home's communal room encourages interaction between the residents. "Someone will say, 'Oh, I had a labrador once', or 'I had a cat', and then they're talking, laughing and sharing stories."

CUDDLE CLUB
Hugo, Ringo and Hudson spread joy wherever they go



Over the years, Sharon and her volunteers have witnessed some incredibly emotional interactions.

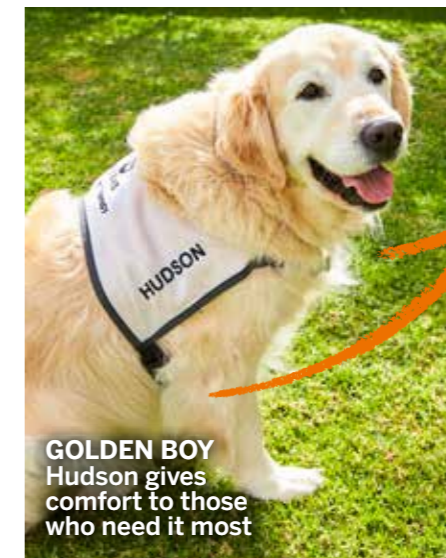
"I was visiting an oncology ward with Hudson, and when I arrived three separate nurses asked me to visit a certain man straightaway. I thought it was a bit out of the ordinary," she says. "When I went in, his family told me that he'd said he was ready to go that morning but wanted to say goodbye to Hudson first. It was so touching that he held on to have a final cuddle with Hudson. It's such a privilege to share in that very personal time."

Sharon says she and the volunteers will sometimes cry after a visit: "But it's not always because it's been a sad visit, it's because it's been so beautiful."

A lot of Paws dogs are rescue dogs – "They just seem to have even more love to give," Sharon admits – and all dogs are encouraged to get close to the people they're visiting. "The volunteers are trained to work around wheelchairs, beds or hospital equipment, so the dogs will at first place two paws up on a bed. If the patient or family member wants the dog on the bed, the volunteer can

lift it up so it can snuggle. It's very controlled but it's all about getting as close as possible."

Sharon believes dogs possess a special kind of magic. "They're just so clever and loving," she says. "They also have a way of knowing how to help; it's almost as if they see into the soul. I've got the best job in the world." • **To learn more, volunteer or donate, visit pawspettherapy.com**



GOLDEN BOY
Hudson gives comfort to those who need it most

Your story

'Hudson was there for us on a terrible day'



Campus security manager John Durbridge, 55, was sitting by his late wife Lyndall's bedside when Hudson visited. Now he helps fundraise for Paws

On January 6 last year, my wife Lyndall, who was 53 at the time, was in the palliative care unit at Campbelltown Hospital. She was very sick with a rare form of cancer – neuroendocrine tumours. She had been diagnosed 18 months previously but on that day the end was close.

I was by Lyndall's side, as were her parents and other family members. We were asked if we'd like a visit from a therapy dog. Lyndall had always loved animals – she had her first horse when she was five and we always had German shepherds at home.

Hudson came in for 15 minutes – he laid quietly by Lyndall's side, with his head resting gently on her stomach. She wasn't very responsive as she was on a high dose of morphine but I think she could sense he was with her. Hudson seemed to have this connection with Lyndall and knew just what to do.

For myself and Lyndall's family it was something else to focus on. Lyndall passed away a few hours after Hudson's visit but I believe he was there for us – and Lyndall – on the very worst day. That contact is the simplest connection but it delivers comfort.

Pet therapy: why it works

Mental health clinician Penny Gibson from Capacity Therapeutic Services uses her therapy dog Ralph to improve family functioning. She explains the benefits of animal-assisted therapy:

- ▶ For anyone who is physically or mentally unwell, dogs ease worry and can be a distraction during a difficult time.
- ▶ Dogs can reduce our heart rate and blood pressure, limit the release of the stress hormone cortisol and facilitate the release of the feelgood hormone oxytocin.
- ▶ Animals have an amazing ability to make people feel understood. Dogs have an innate skill in understanding human social cues, body language and emotions.



ANIMAL INSTINCT
Therapy dogs bring joy to many people in care

