

Wet Nose Therapy **by Gayle M. Irwin**

“My therapist has a wet nose.”

Those words are etched on a wooden plaque which hangs on a wall in my home. I purchased the sign at a pet supply store – that phrase applies to my adopted rescue dog.

Mary, the springer/cocker mix who resides in my home, is a certified therapy dog. She and I have visited nursing homes, public libraries, and elementary classrooms. Mary calmly sits beside our hosts welcoming their gentle ministrations, giving them emotional and physical therapy. Studies show the simple act of petting a dog or cat calms spirits and lowers blood pressure, among other benefits.

Mary's friendliness also draws people to her. Her stub of a black tail wags enthusiastically, her feet prance, and her back-end sways to the doggie music. Those canine two-steps endear her to people she meets, and large grins replace sullen pouts or disinterested expressions. A therapy dog knows when to be calm and when to be outgoing; Mary possesses both traits. She knows how to respond in different settings, approaching people at the library with an energetic springer wag or sitting quietly beside me in the classroom until instructed to “visit.”

When I take Mary to the library or to the nursing home and she is wearing her therapy dog vest, she knows she has a job to do. My dog stops at each person, nuzzling their hand as if to say, “I'm here now; everything will be all right.” The people pet and talk with her; many hug her. When those things happen, Mary's job as therapist, easing the cares of the day away, is complete.

She is wonderful in these settings, and how she responds to the people in her home is also amazing. If someone in the household is having a bad day, our sensitive-spirited dog walks over and looks intently at their face. Her deep brown eyes reflect her concern and seem to be asking, “Are you all right? Can I help?” If we're sitting down, she lays her head on a knee and gazes into our eyes. Instinctively the one whom she's looking at reaches out and pets her. Stroking Mary's head, neck, and sides eases tension, clears a foggy brain, and releases the body's tightness and the heart's stress.

Those benefits apply to most who interact with a pet. The contribution animal assisted therapy provides is not lost on those who run nursing homes and hospitals. Pets visit senior residences, counseling centers, cancer hospitals, and libraries; some schools even have comfort or therapy animals to help students deal with various issues, from problems at home to new school jitters. The four-legged therapists go through special schooling, including obedience training, and are temperament tested to make sure they are the right fit for the job. Therapy animals often wear specially-colored vests, indicating their important role. Many times their most important job is to simply sit with an individual, as if listening when the person talks or just being the quiet companion that's needed.

Mary excels at those things. She sits beside me on the couch or stretches out next to my husband as he rests in his recliner. We may talk about our day, our problems at work, or someone we're concerned about. Mary never interrupts and she doesn't give unwanted advice. Her comforting presence gives us opportunity to talk things out and think situations through. Whether she's wearing her sapphire-colored vest or not, her job as wet-nosed therapist is 24/7 – she's on call day and night, and she doesn't seem to mind the long hours. The comfort and companionship she provides is priceless; we treasure our furry confidante like one would an expensive jewel. Mary relishes her work, at home or in different settings.

Last fall a friend stopped by the house to care for Mary and our other dog while my husband and I were away. My friend sat on a patio chair while the dogs spent time in the backyard. After snuffling around a bit and doing her “business,” Mary walked up to my friend and laid her head on Christie's knee, gazing at her with those compassionate eyes. Christie's son had experienced a concussion in an accident and though several days had passed, he was still suffering from headaches

and dizziness. Mary, in her special doggie way, sensed Christie's concern and seemed to say by her simple acts of touching and gazing, "I'm here, I care." I received a text from my friend that simply said, "Mary is my new BFF."

I took Mary to a kindergarten class a few months after her adoption. The students sat in a circle. As soon as my dog stepped onto the mat of gathered children, she lay down in the midst of the excited five-year-olds with no command given. She rolled on her side, beckoning belly rubs as well as head pats; one-by-one, the children obliged. Mary's short stub of a tail wagged in a circle of its own, causing laughter in the classroom. Petting a dog, laughing, and learning about the rescued dog's life eased many troubled minds and hearts that day – and possibly impacted the young ones for the rest of their lives.

My husband and I adopted Mary a year after the passing of our blind springer spaniel, Sage. Mary had lost her human family suddenly due to the people's health and finances; she was placed for adoption through English Springer Spaniel Rescue. She was already registered as a therapy dog. Upon her adoption, she and I were tested and certified as a therapy team, an accomplishment I had envisioned with Sage but had not completed. Like Sage, Mary has a strong affection for people and a spirit in tune with the burdens they bear. Visits to classrooms, nursing homes, and the libraries give Mary a job, something many dog breeds need. That job suits my springer spaniel, whether in the community or at home. Mary's wet-nose therapy positively impacts people's lives ... including my own.