

JUNE 2021 SPEAKER

CHRISTINE PARADIS THERAPY DOGS

“Being a therapy dog handler is very near and dear to me,” Christine Paradis, a volunteer coordinator in the St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program’s Toronto branch since 2015, glowingly told us. It combines my lifetime love and ownership of dogs with my desire to help people.” She has benefited too. “It’s made me more caring, non-judgmental and unaffected by how people may judge me.”

Of the 40 countries in which St. John Ambulance, a charity organization, operates Canada is the only one where it has a therapy dog certification program. Pre-Covid there were 3,900 therapy dog “teams” (dog + handler) across Canada with the most in Ontario- 2,500. The Covid-19 lockdown had a massive impact; for example, in Toronto, from 275 teams, 800 visits to 130 facilities in May 2019 to only 184 virtual “visits” by 53 teams to 44 facilities this May. “Virtual doesn’t work well because there is no tactile connection,” Christine said.

Therapy dog programs in Canada originated in 1992 when a Peterborough doctor, thinking it could cheer up lonely hospital patients, brought his dog to the hospital. It worked and the idea caught on. The same year, Christine, then a medical secretary at Toronto’s Mount Sinai Hospital, began bringing her dog on Fridays “as an unofficial therapy dog” to stroke, dementia and teenage bone cancer patients to provide comfort. “I fell in love with doing it.”

SJA’s therapy dogs primarily visit the “sick, elderly and lonely” in long term care facilities, retirement homes and hospitals. Coordinators like Christine stringently evaluate people and their dogs who want to volunteer. The process takes six months. The minimum age is 16, police checks are conducted and temperament assessed. “We look for candidates who are comfortable with people including those with disabilities, calm, patient (they may hear the same question 15 times such as ‘What’s your dog’s name?’) and aren’t non-stop talkers. They must commit to a minimum of one hour a week to visit the same facility at the same time of the same day of the week every week. They must be on time; people like the program so much they notice if you arrive at 7:05 instead of the usual 7. Handlers also have to be able to read patients’ faces as not all people speak English or are able to communicate clearly.” Senior handlers accompany new ones for ten visits to see how they do.

All breeds of dogs are eligible in Ontario except pit-bulls. Dogs as young as one year will be considered but SJA recommends age two when they are “mature.” The average age is 5-6 when dogs are accustomed to settle down, “to chill it.” SJA puts candidate dogs through a 2½ hour personality test to see “if they are good neighbours.” They are “swarmed” by other dogs and by people plus a toy is taken away to see if they react calmly. SJA doesn’t want dogs that bark, growl and/or are excitable. Dogs should know “obedience basics - ‘sit,’ ‘stay,’ ‘leave it’ because there can be pills and food dropped on the floor. People aren’t allowed to give treats; some patients had been forgoing part of their meals to feed the dogs. Patients’ requests for a dog to lie beside them on their bed are allowed. SJA provides a blanket or towel. SJA therapy dogs have been used in court to provide comfort for human trafficking and sexual abuse victims as they testify. The dog lies in the witness box or stands beside it depending on the dog’s size. “Handlers have to be mentally strong because of what they will hear,” Christine said. “We use women because the victims can be fearful of any male.”

UWCNY member Anne Mason said she and her dog Becky had been a therapy team. “The dog does the magic,” she said. “It’s phenomenal. So rewarding.”

Susan Goldenberg

Christine Paradis has sent some links to their website and their social media pages for further information.

SJA WEBPAGE: For inquiries about how to become a volunteer or request a therapy dog visit for a facility go to our website sja.ca and click on Toronto Branch and then Therapy Dog Program for prompts.

Facebook: St. John Ambulance Therapy Dogs Toronto Pack

Instagram: @sjatorontotherapydogs

Twitter: @toronto_T_Dogs