



Rx for Recovery ... David, Rosco, Abby, Gabby and Dazzle

By Jayme Aronberg

Mr. Jones¹ sat motionless in his wheelchair. Since suffering a stroke a week earlier, he demonstrated little response to external stimuli. His therapists were becoming increasingly worried about his condition. In walked Abby.

After a few moments of sizing him up, Abby jumped onto Mr. Jones' lap and began licking his face, accidentally knocking out his oxygen tubes in the process. Mr. Jones erupted into hysterical laughter, exhibiting more energy and movement than he had since his stroke. Abby had won him over.

Abby, a Portuguese water dog, is one of several therapy dogs that David and Debbi Rotenberg bring to St. Mary Medical

Center in Bucks County for the past six years to visit with patients.

In 1999, David and Debbi adopted Rosco, an 8-week-old Portuguese water dog. At that time, they had no intention of training therapy dogs; they simply wanted a pet. David and Rosco began attending puppy school. They enjoyed the time together so much that they continued with obedience, novice, advanced training as well as agility training.

After a year of training, a friend suggested that David enter Rosco into an American Kennel Club dog show. Rosco performed well in the obedience ring, but the real prize turned out to be something much more meaningful. While at the

competition, David came across a booth for Therapy Dogs International.

Founded in 1976, Therapy Dogs International is a volunteer organization dedicated to registering therapy dogs and their volunteer handlers for the purpose of visiting nursing homes and hospitals. David knew that Rosco was the perfect candidate to join the more than 15,000 dogs certified with Therapy Dogs International.²

Rosco passed the therapy dog certification exam with flying colors. David contacted local nursing homes, retirement communities and St. Mary Medical Center to offer Rosco's services. St. Mary's asked the pair to come in, and Rosco was an instant celebrity. He snuggled in bed

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Rosco, holding class

with patients who were too ill to move. He walked alongside patients who were receiving physical therapy. But what Rosco really did was provide the TLC that only four-legged friends can give.

Even people who did not like dogs found themselves drawn to Rosco. This four-legged, furry distraction eased patients' minds and helped them to forget about their suffering. Of course, Rosco

brought cheer to the hospital staff as well. Even caregivers who were skeptical of the healing qualities of dog therapy could not deny the positive effects of Rosco's visits.

A therapist told one woman who was having a particularly difficult time learning how to walk with a cane that she couldn't play with Rosco unless she walked over to him herself. Within minutes, the cane was history and she was on the other side of the room, giving Rosco a hug.

In an unpredictable turn of events, not long after David and Rosco began their therapy visits, David himself fell ill. During his hospital stay, Debbi brought Rosco in for visits. It was during this time that David realized the full effect Rosco had on people who were ill. David's belief in the healing power of dogs grew even stronger. Once released from the hospital and armed with this new perspective, David resumed making therapy visits with Rosco. Then he took the program one step further.



Back row: David and Lil. Front row, seated: Abby, Rosco, Gabby and Dazzle

Working with Lil Schonewolf, Director of Volunteer Services, David helped other dog owners interested in bringing their dogs to visit with patients to receive Therapy Dogs International certification. As a result, the dog therapy program at St. Mary Medical Center expanded to include four other handlers.

David and Debbi still bring Rosco for visits but they also bring his mate, Gabby, their daughter, Dazzle, and Gabby's sister, Abby, all Portuguese water dogs. Anne Paige and her Portuguese water dogs, Brutus and Bella, Jean Green and her Labrador, Riley, Ruth VanFossen and her beagle, Barney, and Dianna Wells and her mixed breed, Lulu, all make routine visits as well.

Roughly eight years and nine therapy dogs later, David and Debbi Rotenberg have created an amazing program that has changed the lives and quality care of patients at St. Mary Medical Center.

Jayne Aronberg is a Regional Director of Better World Books, a social venture whose mission is to capitalize on the value of books to fund literacy initiatives locally, nationally and around the world. Jayne served as house manager for The Ronald McDonald House in Washington, DC, from 2004 to 2006. She resides in Arlington, VA. ■

References:

1. The patient's name has been changed to respect his privacy.
2. There are some wonderful clinical studies and information on animal therapy programs available on the Internet, including www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=3035327

One Man's Rx for Recovery

At the far end of a long corridor and from quite a distance, the smiles were obvious. Excitement emanated from the small area directly outside of the entrance to The Wellness Center at St. Mary Medical Center. Several nurses and staff members were gathered.

Patients assisted by canes and wheelchairs were entering and leaving the rehabilitation room. They seemed excited and pleased when they noticed the commotion in the hallway. Jogging toward them, down that long hall, were Rosco, Abby, Gabby and Dazzle.

Waiting with the other patients in the Wellness Center was Norman Oxenberg. Oxenberg suffered a major stroke several years ago. His left leg and left arm were paralyzed; he could not swallow. "I was in sorry shape," Oxenberg explained, then he asked, "What is that man's name?"

The man he was referring to was David Rotenberg, Rosco's owner. Even though Oxenberg didn't know David's name, he credited him with uplifting his spirits and giving him something to look forward every week.

Oxenberg, who was hospitalized for four weeks during a recent holiday season, suggests that spending time with Rosco and "his family" was partially responsible for a shift in attitude and a dedication to rehabilitation. Today, the 83-year-old Oxenberg is incredibly fit. He has regained the entire use of his left arm and leg and is enjoying his favorite activity — country line dancing.

Quick to laud the efforts of many others at the hospital, Oxenberg also eloquently summed up the situation best: "What a wonderful program and great hospital." Happily, there is no end to this saga, which plays every week at the St. Mary Medical Center.



David, Norman and Gabby