



'The only thing better than having this wonderful little Westie in my life is being able to share her with others.'

Alison Mitchell & Tess

Sharing the joy **My experience with pet therapy**

By Alison Mitchell

I brought my Westie Tess home when she was 8 weeks old. It was a day I had waited for with breathless anticipation since first finding a breeder and then through the process of selecting the one who would be my puppy. Over the next days, weeks and months along with all of the routine ups and downs of having a new puppy I also got to know my individual puppy. I began to see firsthand what her personality was like apart from what is standard in the breed. Of all the many things I came to love about her one particular thing stood out right from those early weeks. Tess has an undeniable affinity for senior citizens.

Living in the city and in a building at that, she encountered a countless variety of people and animals of all ages and description on a daily basis. But her reaction to and seeking out of seniors was very evident. Whether in an elevator, park or out for a walk, if she spotted one of her chosen favourite people, she would make a beeline for them and then sit quietly

by their side to be petted. While I was making every effort towards her socialization and obedience training, this was something that just came naturally to her.

It was then that I got the idea that this special gift should be used. I had heard of therapy dog programs at various facilities and there were two retirement homes in our neighbourhood. I was put in touch with Therapeutic Paws of Canada. To my delight we were able to get into an assessment within a couple of weeks and Tess passed with flying colours! After another process of getting all the details sorted out we started making our weekly visits to one of the homes.

I once heard someone say that when a dog walks into a room, the energy changes. This is the best way that I can describe what happens when Tess goes to work on Thursday evenings. Faces light up, smiles spread, and arms that have laid still for

some time reach out to touch her lovely white fur. The ease and steadfastness with which she performs her task each week is truly inspiring to me. I'll admit that at times, I find our visits difficult. Perhaps one of the regular people that we go to visit is not doing well that week, or in the worst of cases is no longer there. With my human mind and heart, I take these things in and struggle at times. But not Tess. She is there to offer a kind and happy spirit, some joy and comfort to whoever wants or needs it. She is content to be still and quiet and allow the people we visit to enjoy a moment of unconditional love, affection and perhaps a happy memory of their own pets through the years. I come away each week feeling indescribably proud of her and what she is able to do and grateful that I am so fortunate as to spend every day with her.

In terms of what our duties are, the facility provides a list of people that have requested visits. We see as many people as we are able to on any given week and then start at the next person down the list the following week. Our visits may be only for a minute or two, or may be longer. It all depends on the person and what their wants and needs are that day. We also invariably encounter people including other residents, family members and staff who are delighted to see her and so we stop to have a moment with them. We have now been visiting the home for about 7 months and Tess is becoming a well known and much anticipated regular. She too is now used to her weekly routine and when I get home from work and tell her today's the day to go and see our friends, she responds with a jump and a bark and much tail wagging!