

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

in people's lives: a team effort

Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC) was established in Hawkesbury, Ont. in 2002, by founder Judy Sauvé and five team members. Now, the not-for-profit boasts more than 400 members who work in what are referred to as Certified Therapy Teams.

TPOC teams provide animal resources for people who require physical, mental, educational and motivational therapy, as well as socialization. Teams consisting of a handler and a dog or cat visit with adults in hospitals, long term care facilities, seniors' residences and day away centres. Their goal is to break down social barriers, recreate happy memories and aid as physiotherapy assistants by getting people who otherwise wouldn't moving about.

"Arthritic hands come magically to life while stroking an animal," says Barb Kelly, TPOC's director of children's programs. "The pets are great motivators."

TPOC also has Child Certified Teams that visit at Sick Kids and Ronald McDonald House in Toronto, as well as five other Ontario Hospitals. Many children in hospitals are not only ill but very frightened; the teams provide an outlet as well as a support system. Some families request that a team be present during a medical test (with the hospital's permission) – this gives the child courage. Recovery



Photos courtesy of Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC)

times from surgeries can also be accelerated with continued pet therapy.

TPOC has approximately 100 Child Certified Teams, some of which work with children who have special needs. Others work in a Paws to Read Program, established in 2003 in Orillia, Ont. The program has been a huge success, with teams making visits to more than 40 public libraries.

"When a child reads with a team, it helps them to gain confidence and build a healthy self-esteem," Kelly explains. "Animals do not judge. Children who are reluctant

to read will pick up a book and with the animals' calming effect and the handler's ability to listen and assist them, the child will suddenly become submerged in a story."

Not only will the child's reading, language and comprehension skills improve, Kelly says, it has been noted that their social skills may improve as well. Working with the TPOC team, the child learns respect, which may have a rippling effect in their lives.

Recently, TPOC teams have been visiting with post-secondary students during exams to relieve students from stress and anxiety. For some of these students, it may be their first year away from their families and pets.

Pet therapy visits create a positive and healthy environment for both children and adults. TPOC practices the highest level of risk management for those they visit. All TPOC teams have been assessed by qualified evaluators, as well as having monitored visits. Team members have received Vulnerable Sector Screening with personal references, and all pets have yearly veterinary clearances.

Donations are greatly appreciated to fund TPOC's educational seminars, which provide ongoing training to team members. Find out more at www.tpoc.ca.

