

## Soothing Souls with Words, Paws and Strings

***Volunteers offer unique skills to help patients***

By Yadira Galindo | August 26, 2015



When Riley and Cody nonchalantly saunter into [Sulpizio Cardiovascular Center at UC San Diego Health](#), patients like Jeannine Trudeau immediately take note. She sits up in her waiting room seat; her demeanor changes from pensive to cheerful.

“I have a dog just like him!” Trudeau says to Nancy Treadway, Cody’s owner.

Cody is a 2-year-old Maltese pet therapy dog that joins 7-year-old Riley, a Golden Retriever, to make rounds at the UC San Diego Health La Jolla campus. On this day, Treadway and Marcia Martin, Riley’s owner, were visiting patients undergoing [vascular disease treatment](#).

Once Cody and Riley’s admirers had the chance to snuggle with the dogs in the waiting room, the dogs stopped to say hello to a few more people in the hallways before Treadway and Martin began knocking on hospital room doors to offer patients who require hospitalization, such as John Chamberlin, some face time with the two furry therapists.

“I miss my dogs,” said Chamberlin. “You’re doing a great job ladies. This is really beneficial to all of us.”

Martin, a retired nurse, has been volunteering with Riley since he was 2 years old. Riley comes from a line of therapy dogs. When he came home with Martin, Riley’s training continued until he exhibited all of the right behaviors of a therapy dog: gentle, calm and obedient to basic commands like sit and stay.

“These dogs offer love,” said Martin. “It can be very profound. I visited a young girl having a heart transplant who said Riley was just like a dog she had. She was holding him and petting him and crying and she said to me, ‘This means so much to me.’ She was gravely ill and Riley made a difference in at least that day, that moment.”

Judy Bradrick, UC San Diego Health director of Volunteer Services, says volunteers are an essential part of caring for patients and their families. They act as concierges, greeting and assisting family members waiting for loved ones, delivering reading materials, assisting patients in the Infusion Center, delivering lab specimens and much more. At UC San Diego Health, 1,345 individuals volunteered more than 92,000 hours in 2014.

“Volunteers provide additional support to both patients and our staff,” said Bradrick. “Whether they’re running errands for busy nurses and doctors or escorting patients, they provide an extra personal touch.”

Retired Air Force Colonel Paul Henkel knows too well the impact that a volunteer can have on patients. His wife, Jacqueline Henkel, suffered a stroke but after recovering began to volunteer in the Stroke Support Program, sharing her life-changing experience with newly afflicted patients.

When Jacqueline died, Henkel took over volunteer duties both at UC San Diego Medical Center in Hillcrest and Thornton Hospital in La Jolla. Henkel follows patients from entry to the emergency room (ER) to the intensive care unit (ICU) and through the rehabilitation process.



“In the ER, people are very afraid,” said Henkel. “I reassure them and tell them that a positive attitude can get you back on your feet faster. In the ICU, I met a couple in their 40s with three children. The wife suffered a stroke. I told them I knew they felt bad but to try smiling and they’ll see the bright side. Later they told me, ‘Trying to smile during this process was the hardest thing we ever did

and it was the best thing we could do.’”

Having been a caregiver, Henkel offers family members ideas on how they can help their loved one through recovery. His name and photo are posted in the ICU so that people know who he is and can reach out to him if they need someone to talk to.

“They don’t want hear you talk all the time. They want someone to listen,” said Henkel. “By listening you can get insight into what their problems are, but honestly as they talk they inevitably come up with their own answers. I’m just there to prop them up so they know what to expect.”

Whether talking about the road to recovery or talking about their dogs back home, patients just need a moment of respite, said Treadway.

“If they get two minutes of relief from the setting they’re in or maybe from the discomfort they’re feeling, that’s good. It’s therapy for them,” said Treadway. “The interaction that you see when the patients have visits with therapy dogs is transforming. The dogs sense when a patient needs TLC.”

Henkel’s experience helps bring clarity during turbulent times for stroke patients. Cody and Riley provide at least a momentary escape. And Iris Lee, a college student studying chemistry, brings soothing sounds to the Thornton Hospital lobby as she plays hymns on her violin.

“Your music soothes my soul,” said a passerby. Others clap from a second floor overlooking the lobby. And still more people offer single-word praises like beautiful and enchanting. She’s been hugged and sent letters encouraging her to continue to play.

“Playing music is really calming,” said Lee, who has been playing since she was 8 years old. “Every time I (play at Thornton), people say it’s beautiful and ‘It’s the music that I needed.’ It really touches my heart. Their faces say that they enjoy the music.”

Lee originally studied music in college, but then decided that she’d prefer to be a pharmacist to help others in a different way. When a friend shared volunteer opportunities at the hospital, Lee immediately signed up to volunteer in the pharmacy department and to play music for waiting patients, families and friends. She found she could help others through both passions and gain skills to help in her future career.

“When I first started volunteering, I thought it was awkward playing the violin alone,” said Lee, who has previously played in orchestras, trios and quartets. “Now I find it rewarding. If anyone plays a musical instrument, I highly recommend playing in the hospital. It’s a great program that helps us all.”

UC San Diego Health is always looking for volunteers. With many opportunities available to assist patients, there is a role for just about anyone to fill. For more information, visit the [Volunteers Services website](#), call 619-543-6370 or email at [volsvcs@ucsd.edu](mailto:volsvcs@ucsd.edu).

“It is such a win-win situation for everyone,” said Martin. “It’s wonderful for the dogs because they love the attention. It’s great for the patients because they’re happy and it reduces stress. And it’s great for us because we interact with people and share our happiness of owning these dogs. I’ve volunteered in many roles in my life and this is the one that I get the most satisfaction from.”

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