Tipsy arrives after year hiatus without canine

The sleek brown dog with cocoa-colored eyes has a way with residents at Hilltop Estates Care Center.

At least to observers, employees and others at the center, Tipsy—a 7-year-old labrador and German shorthair mix—is making a difference.

“She’s therapy for the residents,” said senior services representative Michelle Hecox. “It’s another way for them to express themselves.”

The eyes of residents who cannot speak light up when Tipsy pads into a room.

Hands reach down alongside wheelchairs to stroke the dog’s brown fur.

“You can just tell by the smile on their face,” said Darlene Larson, a restorative aide also known as Hilltop’s “dog whisperer.”

Larson, who’s a member of the Hilltop Animal Committee, has helped each of the three dogs the center has had transition into life there.

She has four of her own at home and said she loves working with dogs.

The aide tells of an overnight stay Tipsy had with a resident.

STUDY: ANIMALS DON'T JUDGE

The Waltham Book of Human-Animal Interactions published a study that found elderly women in nursing homes preferred an hour-long session interacting with a rabbit to an hour of open leisure time.

Animals don't judge the people who love them, making the comfort of a lap animal, the liveliness of an aviary or an aquarium's tranquility unconditional pleasures, the study said. (Source: www.everydayhealth.com)

"The lady said it felt good to have her on her bed but that she couldn't move her feet," Larson said. "She often lays on residents' beds or on the floor beside the bed."

Hilltop has allowed cats to stroll the hallways and rooms for a long time.

The center now has three resident felines—Tilly, Patches and Tom.

For non-animals lover, spray bottles are kept handy to ward off furry residents.

The center's first dog, a golden retriever stray that had 11 puppies, showed up about 15 years ago.

The staff built a doghouse and gave away all the puppies but the mother dog had a chewing problem. After six months, the staff found a new home for the dog.

Another dog, from a prison facility in Colorado, had to be returned because the animal wouldn't bond with anyone but Larson.

Four years later, staff members decided to try yet another dog.

Misha was from an Omaha shelter and had been trained to live at a nursing home.

The brown-and-white springer spaniel padded into the facility and never left for 11 years.

One resident took to the dog immediately.

“He knew thunder and lightning scared Misha so he’d throw back his blankets and let her climb in with him,” Larson recalled. “When he died, Misha sat at the front door for two days.”

Many of the staff members and residents grieved when the dog was diagnosed with throat cancer and had to be euthanized.

A framed picture of Misha and an urn containing her ashes sit on a shelf by the front door.

“She’s still in our hearts,” Hecox said.

When residents started asking whether the facility would get another dog, the staff began looking around and found Tipsy.

“We were so used to having one,” Hecox said. “People would come to visit and say ‘Where’s Misha?’ ”

Hecox said she’s glad Hilltop gave Tipsy a chance.

“She’s been a good fit here and hopefully we’ve made a better life for her.

“Hopefully it’s a better life for the residents,” she said.

ebarrett@gothenburgtimes.com

308-537-3636