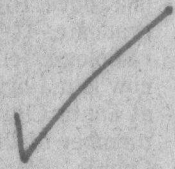


Pets Bring Joy To Nursing Homes

Almost Everybody Wants To Pet The Dog Or Cat



Claire Wellhouse hugs a rabbit.



By CAROLYN LEAL
Sentinel Living Editor

THE ELDERLY WOMAN cuddled the kitten in her lap, stroking its fur gently. "I used to have a cat, long ago," she recalled, a smile flashing across her face.

That instant of affection and communication is the aim of an imaginative pet therapy project being launched in Santa Cruz by a social worker and her business and professional women's club.

Pat Stanton, who works with the county Social Services Department, and the Branciforte BPW are putting pets into the area's nursing homes to cheer the elderly. The puppies and kittens are borrowed from the Santa Cruz County Humane Society and accompanied by trained volunteers.

"All of this started by accident," explains Stanton. "I was visiting a withdrawn client in a nursing home and it was hard to get her to talk, so I asked the administrator if I could bring my dog in. When I did, it took half an hour to get to her room. Everybody wanted to pet the dog."

Sharing a cuddly pet helps to get emotions out, says Stanton. "People are willing to talk about animals but not so willing to talk about family, because there's a lot of pain involved."

Ultimately, Stanton hopes each nursing home in Santa Cruz will have a resident pet — a cat or a dog adopted from the shelter. "What we really want is to get animals adopted into facilities."

A similar project which concentrates on animal adoption was started in Boston by the Junior League. "They get animals about six months old and really train them to live in that facility," says Stanton. She notes that

reason to face another bleak day.

As a client of Stanton's said, "The worst thing about growing old is having so much love to give and no one to give it to."

"Pet therapy is not a panacea for medical or social problems," Stanton is quick to admit. "Patients with psychological and physical disorders require professional treatment. However, the introduction of pets can provide a sense of self-esteem and a feeling of being needed and wanted."

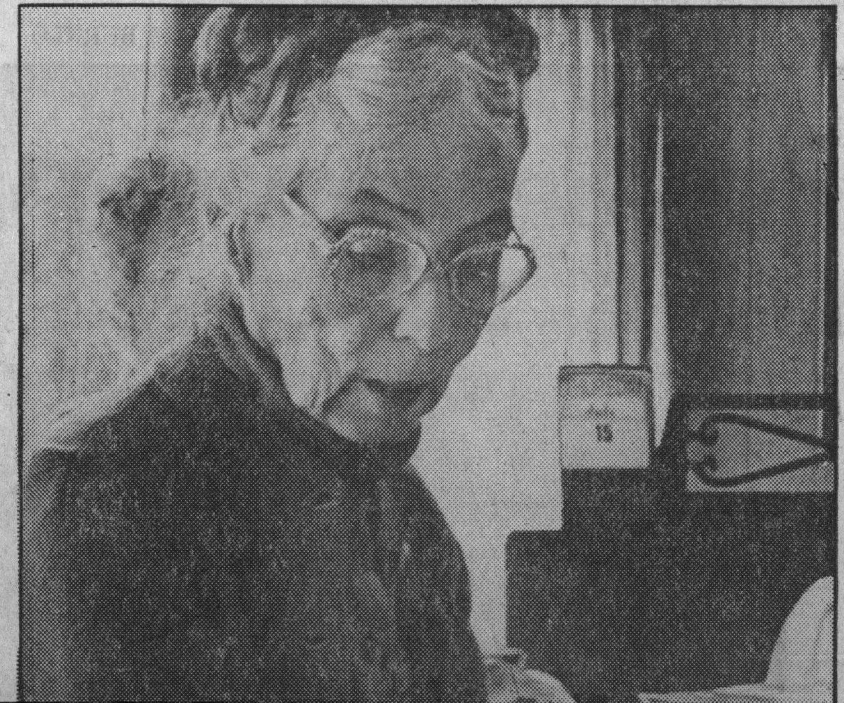
According to Stanton, studies have shown that petting an animal reduces blood pressure in humans and heart attack victims with pets

live longer than those without. "Not having a pet may be hazardous to your health."

Stanton says the only criticism she has encountered is from a nursing supervisor who charged it is cruel to take animals from the shelter and then return them. But Stanton says the animal shelter backs the pet therapy project.

"People are ready for this."

If you would like to volunteer to take a puppy or kitten from the shelter or to share your own pet with elderly residents in nursing homes, call 429-1913.



"The worst thing about growing old is having so much love



Del Markey visits with a bright-eyed friend.

A similar project which concentrates on animal adoption was started in Boston by the Junior League. "They get animals about six months old and really train them to live in that facility," says Stanton. She notes that docile and obedient animals work best.

Stanton says there are no legal barriers to having pets in institutions. "I've checked with state licensing and there's no problem, as long as the pets don't wander through the food preparation area."

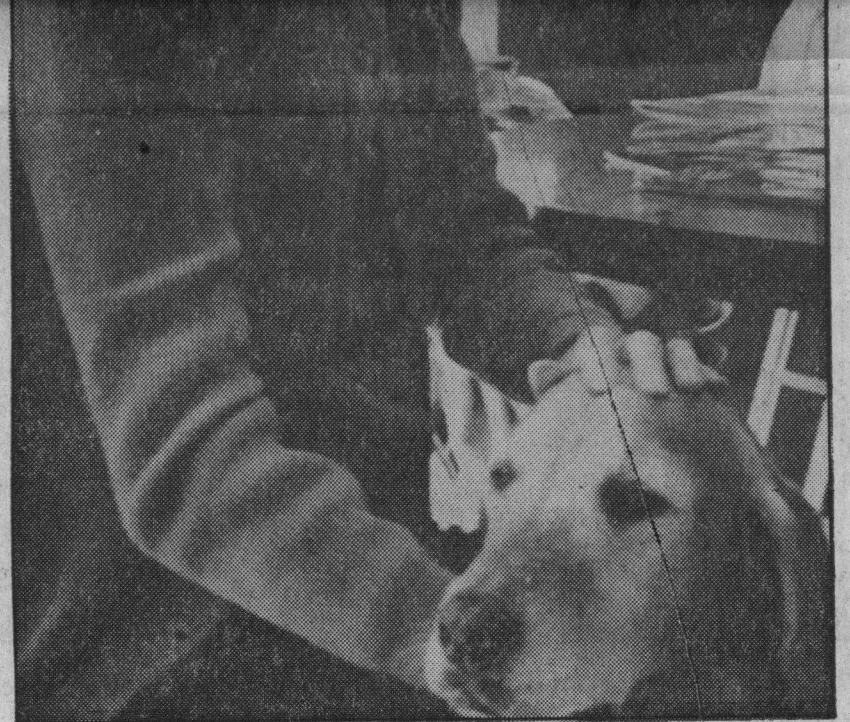
The Pet Facilitated Therapy Project will have two benefits, according to Stanton. It will bring life and love to nursing homes and it will spark more volunteers to visit the elderly.

"We've found it difficult to get people to visit nursing homes. And until we get the public really involved, we won't solve the problems. We'll still just be warehousing people."

According to Stanton, the idea of using animals as therapy is nothing new. "Man's best friend — along with, cats, birds and other creatures — have been used to reach people for the past 30 years."

Anyone who has a dog or a cat knows that pets give love and inspire loving. Having an animal to feed and groom can also offer a

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Mildred Gruber shares affection with a four-legged friend.



Luigi Voglino enjoys the feel of a fluffy kitten.

It's Home To Rufus

Rufus, a gentle, loving, charcoal-gray male cat, has been an undercover pet therapist at Driftwood Nursing Hospital. He originally lived in the apartment building next door but decided he preferred living at the nursing home. When his owner moved away, Rufus stayed.

Rufus has lived at the nursing home for over four years and residents hid him when the inspectors visited, thinking his presence was illegal.

But a check with the state revealed that Rufus could stay if he was healthy and had his shots. Now, he's an official part of the staff.

Rella Coleman, activity director, says he never goes into a room unless invited and never jumps into a lap until an invitation is extended. "He's a real favorite. Everybody worries about him. If he's not around, they'll ask, 'Where's the cat?'"