

# “Want to Hold Her?”

Taking my dog to spend time with seniors has done more than cheer up the people who meet her

**D**o you take pictures of every dog?” I asked.

“Yes, I keep a photo album of every dog that visits,” Mr. Stevens said. “But usually all I get is pictures of the owners’ legs.”

It looked as though Mr. Stevens had been wearing his Air Force jacket for a long time, yet he was one of the more put-together of the half dozen residents of DC’s Armed Forces Retirement Home who had volunteered to be subjects for therapy-dog training.

My French bulldog, Lolly, has never met anyone she didn’t like. She drops to the pavement when a stranger offers the slightest attention. When we walk down the street, kids come running. “She’d make a great therapy dog,” my wife has often said.

After months of looking around, we found a therapy group that sounded like a good match and signed up for training. Once there, we realized it wasn’t really training for Lolly—all she had to do was be herself. The training was for us.

Therapy dogs are brought into retirement homes, hospitals, and other places where a chance to pet a dog might bring some joy to people. Our trainer said that after a visit with an animal, patients are usually “up” for a week.

We learned the rules and practiced some commands, and then it was time to meet the seniors. Other than Mr. Stevens, the residents didn’t seem all that enthused. Most just sat and stared.

In a situation like that, every physical and expressive cue that someone is approachable is nonexistent. You see a man in a wheelchair staring at his foot—does he want you to bring the dog to him? Is he going to scream if you get within two feet?

Lolly decided that the residents weren’t nearly as interesting as the other dog owners, who did things like speak, move, and acknowledge her presence.

My wife, Katherine, figured it out first: She noticed a woman in a wheelchair, went over,



picked up Lolly, and asked, “Would you like to meet my dog?” The woman smiled and reached out to touch Lolly’s face.

I thought Katherine’s approach was genius. I went up to the most spaced-out guy in the room, pulled up a chair, and introduced him to Lolly. Without saying a word, he thrust out both arms and gently rubbed her neck.

By this time, a few other residents had come over to see what was going on. We took turns bringing Lolly to them. The ones who spoke wanted to know everything about her—how old she was, where she came from.

Then they’d tell us about pets they’d had. “Yeah, I used to have a dog that was this color—we called him Mr. Barks,” one man said. “Then one day, Mr. Barks woke up and his back legs didn’t work.”

I told him Mr. Barks sounded like a

**The author and Lolly bring big smiles to the Armed Forces Retirement Home.**

wonderful dog.

Since then we’ve been back a few times, and Lolly is now officially certified. She doesn’t care that these retirees are frail, old, or shy. She has a good time regardless.

I do, too. Given the choice of spending an hour listening to an old person reminisce about how much he loved his pet or sitting at brunch and hearing some hipster go on about an indie band, Mr. Barks is going to win every time. **W**

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