

Sadie's Story: A Special Therapy Dog

Remembering a special senior dog.

Rose Boccio

The young boy was very sad. He missed his mom.

He was tired of the chemotherapy. He wanted to go home.

He wanted to be well again.

Then, a nurse told him that Sadie was waiting for him in the North Carolina hospital where he was being treated for cancer. He headed to the day room, where he'd visited with the Golden Retriever before. The boy didn't realize it, but Sadie's visits were part of her job – she was a pet therapy volunteer.

At 10 years old, Sadie was definitely in the senior class for a Golden Retriever. But that didn't matter to the boy playing with her. Looking forward to their time together, the boy took a light-catcher he made to show Sadie's owner, Joe Gangloff. While the young cancer patient sat on the couch and tossed a ball to Sadie, he asked Gangloff for his autograph.

"He was dynamite," Gangloff said of the boy. "You could see an immediate difference in him when he saw Sadie." For those few moments, the boy put all his adult-sized worries away and enjoyed his time with the dog.

Those who benefited from Sadie's warmth and attention said she just knew when and how to provide comfort or distraction. She made a habit of brightening the days of patients, doctors, nurses, and many others.

Licensed by Delta Society, Sadie logged nearly 1,900 hours visiting patients in hospitals and psychiatric units, elementary school children's reading programs, and a group respite program for patients with Alzheimer's disease.

She received plenty of patting and hugging wherever she went. However, what she gave in return seemed immeasurable. Gangloff recalled that many patients formed strong bonds with Sadie. She didn't judge them, "and that's very, very special to someone who hasn't had that."

Just having Sadie sit in a room with a patient was therapeutic, said Nancy Gore, who served as the director of the group respite program for Alzheimer's patients in North Carolina. She remembered clearly Sadie's impact on clients: "She would physically love on someone. She'd lean on you like she was hugging you," Gore said. "Patients who were easily agitated would find her company soothing."

One client, who suffered with Alzheimer's and was aware of how the condition was affecting her, was very reluctant to engage in activities. She felt unsure of herself and embarrassed.

"But when Sadie came," Gore said, "the woman really opened up. She began talking about the dog she once had. It brought her such joy to remember her own dog and to love on Sadie."

Sadly, in the fall of 2005, Sadie unexpectedly passed away. The warmth and comfort she and Gangloff gave people will not be forgotten.

Sadie's intuitive nature and calm demeanor inspired one patient to call her "an angel with four paws." A gift like Sadie could only have been heaven sent.

Rose Boccio is a freelance writer who lives in Illinois.