

Furry and feathered friends bring comfort

BY JEANNA OLSON
for Capital Newspapers

Most people have heard of Oscar, the Rhode Island nursing home cat. He's the one who sits with terminal patients before they die. There are less famous pets just as willing to offer their services and a sympathetic paw.

Meet Mitsy Sue, a young Brussels Griffon—think Ewok—just back from a weekly visit to St. Mary's and taking a catnap (excuse the expression) before venturing out again with owner Jim Lackore.

The two are volunteers committed to weekly rounds at St. Mary's, HospiceCare Inc., Ingleside Living Communities, and – soon – Meriter, after some further training.

Dan Chin, director of public affairs at HospiceCare, says that pet therapy is considered a complementary medicine technique proven to drop anxiety scores by 24 percent. It helps reduce the stress hormone epinephrine, and reduces blood pressure.

"At HospiceCare we have a visiting pet program for our patients," says Chin. "These dogs are trained for a medical environment by the Delta Society."

Mitsy Sue is a Delta registered therapy dog. That means she's already passed a tough exam and adheres to the high standards and demands of a Delta Society service or therapy animal. She and Jim are HospiceCare volunteers and one of the 60 Dogs On Call therapy teams. Dogs on Call is the Madison affiliate of the Delta Society.

"She plops herself down in front of a room and says 'Hey dad, we're going in there.' She's upset if we don't go in the right room," says Lackore. "Once I put her on the bed, she just snuggles

up with a patient. They'll pet her, scratch her, and she'll lick the patient's hand and give the patient high fives."

Mitsy Sue also loves to entertain by dancing, jumping through Jim's arms, going into a down position, crawling along the floor, and taking a bow.

"In the hospice care situation, it's more for the family," says Lackore. "They're grieving, they're upset; they don't know when it's going to be, how long it's going to be. They're seeing their loved ones slip away. It's a relief just to have a bright little dog come walking in, and sit down and do tricks for them."

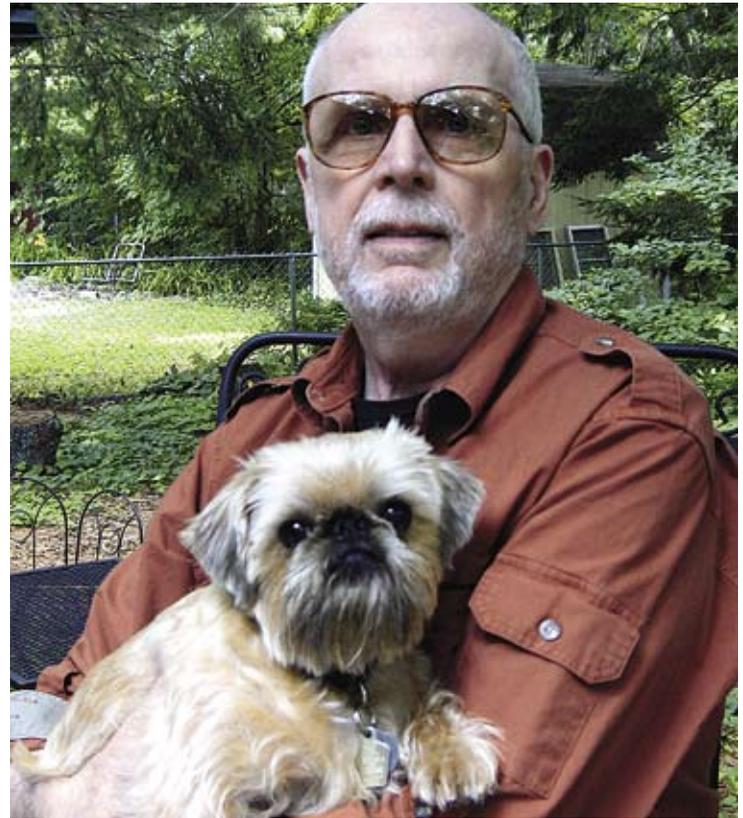
Patricia McConnell of Wisconsin Public Radio's "Calling All Pets" is an animal behaviorist and UW zoology professor. She'll be discussing dogs and healing in a Friday, Nov. 1 Meriter class called "For the Love Of A Dog: Healing, Hearts, Body & Soul."

"It's going to be about what we know from psychology and biology; about social connections between people and dogs, and how dogs can be so profoundly helpful to us both medically, in some surprising ways, and psychologically," says McConnell.

How can a dog help with the grieving process? "By having another social connection, particularly one that's so pure and uncomplicated," she says. "I think one of the values of our relationship with dogs is that they can't talk."

Faye Pietrokowsky, animal communicator, believes animals know what we're saying, and talks about how this understanding helped a Humane Society Basset hound know why and how he was needed by a woman whose husband was dying.

"The dog acted like it was on a mission," recounts Pietrokowsky.



Mitsy Sue, a Brussels Griffon shown with owner Jim Lackore, "volunteers" at HospiceCare as well as hospitals and nursing homes.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HELEN LACKORE

"It knew what to do, it went directly to her husband ... and would sit on the bed when he was resting, and then would come over and sit with her. She said she felt the dog was there for both of them, but the dog knew that her husband was dying."

And then there's a chatty cockatoo named Kiwi. Kiwi's owner suffered a loss in the family while going through a difficult divorce. He was by her side to the point where he'd squawk loudly if not allowed to ride in the car along with her.

"He followed her around, he'd want to be on her shoulder," says Pietrokowsky. "When the other animals, when the cats and the dogs are around, he'd chase them and tease them. He bonded to her and wants to take care of her."

Pietrokowsky believes that animals try to tell us what's on their minds. Whatever the connection, there's no denying that one exists.

"I think there is actually tremendous value sometimes in this

non-verbal connection that we have with our dogs that's so emotionally based," says McConnell. "Dogs can't say the wrong thing to you like your best friend can."

In other words, you can wear your fat pants in front of your black labs and they won't judge you for ordering a pizza.

"Dogs can be so incredibly supportive and soothing just because they're social partners of ours. They're so emotional, they can look sad, they can look happy, they can seem to be sympathetic often," says McConnell.

More information on Trish McConnell and "Calling All Pets" is available by visiting www.wpr.org/pets. Faye Pietrokowsky will be back in Wisconsin for the Oshkosh Family Pet Expo March 15 to 16; her Web site is www.inner-design.net.

Meanwhile, Mitsy Sue will keep on dancing. ■