

To boldly go where few dogs have gone before

By Michaela Kennedy

Worf is a St. Bernard with a mission. He is a certified Canine Good Citizen, and he travels all over the state to assist people in educational and therapy situations.

Islander Pat Sumner saw Worf's potential as a specialist in pet-assisted therapy soon after she adopted him. Worf was not even a year old when he was given up unwanted to Delmyra Kennels in Exeter. Two days before 9/11, Sumner rescued him from a worse fate.

Recognizing his good temperament, she enrolled him in the pet therapy program at the Community College of Rhode Island. Together, owner and dog went through the program, which included the opportunity to visit hospitals where Worf could become accustomed to strange equipment and a variety of people.

"A good temperament is the ability to be quiet. A pet therapy dog needs to have a good deal of patience," Sumner explains. Worf has spent many days with Sumner at her travel booking office, where the telephones ring and people come and go throughout the day. "A big part is socializing. He comes with me every day," she says.

Pet-assisted therapy is a new evolving field, with no rules or regulations for the most part, according to Sumner. The big problem she used to have was organizations that would not allow animals in their buildings. But an amendment in 2000 to a law that provided the privileges of access and transportation to personal as-



Worf and Pat Sumner

sistance animals was extended to pet-assisted therapy pets, which are now allowed in to hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and educational facilities. Sumner is happy that the law "gives us many opportunities."

A few days after the Station nightclub fire three years ago, Sumner was invited with Worf and other pet therapy-trained dogs to attend a grief counseling gathering for families and friends of fire victims at the Inn at the Crossings in Warwick. She knew it would be a difficult experience, since many people were waiting to bury their loved ones. Sumner asked her husband and son to go with them.

"At first, I thought it was a bad idea. No one wanted dogs there," says her son, Scott Sumner. But

once they arrived, he saw what a good idea the dogs were for the people grieving.

Sumner witnessed one young man come in to the meeting room and begin to pound his fist in anger against the wall. Worf barked once, got up and walked over to the man. "I wasn't sure what would happen, but the man knelt down, hugged Worf and sobbed into his fur," Sumner remembers.

Mother and son agree feeling at a loss to help in the face of such mourning, but "Worf did everything." They returned to the gathering a few more times that week. "It helps ease life a lot," they add.

Sumner's first experience with pet therapy hooked her to the concept. She brought her canine friend, who had gone through the

therapy training program, to a nursing home.

She recalls seeing an elderly woman who was in an advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease, and being told the woman would be unresponsive. But "when she saw the dog, her whole face lit up," Sumner says. She has worked to help others become involved in pet-assisted therapy ever since.

Sumner notes that she loves doing pet therapy in her free time. She

and Worf do various educational programs, such as the "Reading Fur Fun" program in a state foster home in Newport, as well. Once a week the boys, ages 5 to 11, read books to Worf to enhance their reading skills.

For those who would like more information on pet-assisted therapy programs or would like to help fulfill holiday wish lists for children in need this year, contact Pat Sumner at 423-2333 or e-mail traveletc@aol.com.

Where to give to the needy this Christmas season

- Women's Resource Center of Newport and Bristol Counties 114 Touro Street, Newport, RI 02840. Adopt-A-Family program: contact Constance Vergowven at constance@wrcnbc.org or at 846-5263 of the Newport Office, or visit <http://www.wrcnbc.org>.
- Domestic Violence Resource Center of South County, 61 Main St. Wakefield, RI 02879, 782-3990, www.wrcsc.org/InKind.htm.
- Lucy's Hearth, 909 West Main Rd., Middletown, RI 02842, 847-2021. Open 24 hours a day. However, the best time to drop off donations is between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.
- Central Baptist Church, 99 Narragansett Ave., Jamestown, Rhode Island, 423-1651. Mailing address: Central Baptist Church, P.O. Box 295, Jamestown, Rhode Island, 02835-0295.
- Jamestown Chapel A non-denominational extension work from Exeter Chapel of Route 102, Exeter, 423-0617.
- St. Mark Church, 60 Narragansett Ave., 423-1421 or www.stmarkjtn.org.
- St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, 87 Narragansett Ave., Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835, 423-1762. Come by parish office M-F from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. to donate items.



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