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PHOTO BY PERRY REICHANADTER

# Puppy love

**TheraPets comforts fearful patients and families**

It's nearly 9 a.m. and Molly and Stella are four hours into an eight-hour shift. These therapy canines have already soothed a dozen St. Vincent Hospital pre-surgery patients.

Stella is in the arms of a senior, while the man's teary wife pats Stella's head and assures her husband everything will be fine.

Molly, meanwhile, is perched at the feet of a golden-haired 7-year-old, sharing a rolling hospital bed as the staff maneuvers the duo toward the operating room's swinging outer doors. "Bye, Molly. I'll see you when I'm done," said the girl, giving the apricot-colored dog a farewell hug.

Scenes like these give Darlene Gosnell, 61, inspiration.



Molly and trainer Darlene Gosnell make their rounds at St. Vincent.

"It's almost like dogs have a sixth sense and know when someone is hurting," said Gosnell, the founder of TheraPets of Indiana. The non-profit agency, based in Fishers, has nine terriers, which work with anyone who needs comforting: coma patients, autistic children and people nearing death. The cairn terriers and West Highland white terriers (westies) are known for their companionship.

MacIntosh (a.k.a. "Big Mac"), a 21-pound cairn terrier, sits with the dying and their family members.

"I really do think he knows when someone is going to pass away," Gosnell said. Big Mac will sit on the bed, getting as close as possible. Often, the patient will hold Big Mac, feeling his heartbeat and respira-

tion. His fur and warm body are soothing.

"Most people will say they're afraid of death," she said, referring to the dogs' work in hospice settings. "We'll go in and the family is off in the corners of the room, afraid of getting too close (to the dying person). Then comes in the little dogs and they lay there, right on the bed, getting as close as they can. The dog draws the family closer and they realize they don't need to stand in the corners. I'll start asking questions and they'll tell me nice things about their loved one, sharing their memories. The family starts talking and death suddenly isn't as morbid."

Gosnell, a former special education teacher and the mother of three grown sons, got the idea to work with therapy dogs after recovering from a car crash in 2000. She sustained a brain injury, forcing her to retire from teaching. A neuropsychologist suggested a pet; Gosnell followed orders, purchasing Molly. She found Molly's companionship therapeutic and began investigating the idea of taking dogs into hospital and hospice settings.

That's when TheraPets was formed.

The dogs — and Gosnell — are on call 24 hours a day. Doctors, family members or other hospital staff request visits. Other times patients spot the dogs in hospital corridors and request a visit. There are even occasions when Gosnell gets asked about her work in shopping mall parking lots (her TheraPets bumper sticker reads: "Let our paws lend a helping hand").

"I had a woman the other day stop me in the grocery store parking lot and ask if I would go visit her mother in the nursing home," Gosnell said, adding that TheraPets' services are free, relying on donations and grants to keep the dogs fed and trained.

The health benefits to patients has caught the eye of several St. Vincent Hospital physicians, including Dr. Philip N. Eskew Jr., director of physician and patient relations. The hospital has set up a separate foundation to fund a pet ministry of its own, with Gosnell's TheraPets as its first initiative. On a personal level, Eskew is an owner of two of the therapy dogs.

"The dogs also provide an amazing morale boost to the staff," said Eskew, noting that Gosnell has racked up more than 1,500 volunteer hours the past three years.

"Don't let Darlene kid you. She likes to say the dogs do all the work, but she's right here with them."



Patient Irma Barber pets Stella.