



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

PAL Club kids read a book about a Westie to Nessie.

This student's reward was taking a pal for a stroll.

A little dog tolerating big hugs.

This sweet dog gives the lady a kiss.

A retired flyboy and his canine companion.

Volunteers enable human and pet connections.

## People. Animals. Love. – PAL

BY HEATHER SCHOELL, PHOTOS BY PATRICIA WELLS

Love is a powerful tool – an energy that can heal. People Animals Love (PAL) harnesses love for humanity and love for animals, bringing them together to create healing for people who need it – the sick, the elderly and children at risk of not knowing to value animal life. And who can resist happiness in front of a friendly furry face?

### PAL Creates Joy

PAL brings joy to the people who need it most – it's as simple as that. Volunteers take their PAL-certified dogs to places where unwell or elderly people can bask in the love and attention of a friendly dog and its owner. Volunteer dogs and people stay for an hour, chatting, petting and letting the power of bonding with a furry friend work its magic.

In the late 1970s, Father Bill Went, a District priest, noticed that when someone dies, the bereaved do better if they have a pet, an observation he communicated to his pets' veterinarian, Dr. Earl Strimple. In 1981, a client gave Strimple \$20,000 to start PAL. It began with a pilot program in Lorton Prison, with inmates learning the animal care profession by taking care of feral cats on the prison campus. From there it evolved to military hospitals, where Strimple noted a preponderance of dog owners in the military, the

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dogs acting as "anchors" for families often uprooted. In Bethesda Naval Hospital and Walter Reed, Strimple brought sick pet owners their four-legged reasons to get well, or to be at peace.

### PAL in Schools

Another arm of PAL is the work they do for inner-city youth, many of whom have never had exposure to friendly pets. PAL Club, in partnership with the Rotary Club, employs a science-based curriculum in an aftercare program, newly situated in Ward 8's Stanton Elementary School, and PAL Summer Camp at Garfield Elementary School. Said Rene Wallis, executive director of PAL, "We are joining efforts to close the achievement gap."

By using the kids' love of animals as an incentive to learn empathy for living creatures, PAL is teaching children to be kind, essentially. Children are taught that loud voices can hurt an animal's ears and that roughness is not kind treatment of animals. "When they achieve animal-friendly behavior, we bring dogs into the classrooms," Wallis explained. "Empathetic behavior is rewarded with field trips to the zoo or other activities."

### Volunteers Make PAL

The Hollywood image of lonely and isolated souls in a retirement home is a reality in facilities for the aged and mentally disabled. Being in these facilities can be difficult – people sitting in wheelchairs are an uncomfortable reminder of our own mortality and tenuous grip on sanity. So it takes exceptional people to volunteer their time in nursing homes, mental health facilities and hospitals and make a lonely and marginalized person's life happier for an hour.

Michael Self, a disabled combat Vietnam veteran and resident of the independent living area of the Armed Forces Retirement Home (AFRH), explained, "Many dog owners come in and look for someone who is lonely. The residents enjoy the friendship," he said. "I try to make the visit enjoyable – I put out water for the dogs and let people know PAL is coming."

"The best thing about PAL is the fact that volunteers are committed," said Wallis. "It's very impressive. They do it month after month, year after year. Especially with seniors – it's hard to work with seniors," she continued, "especially those with Alzheimer's and dementia."

Volunteers with PAL may go alone or in a group. Individual volunteers may join an existing group through PAL, or an organization, such as a school or church, or a few friends may form their own group to conduct the one-hour visits.

"It's really a great thing to do with kids," Wallis commented. "Quite a few families volunteer. It's something to do together, and the people they visit love it. It's like a two-fer – they get a visit from kids and animals," she said. "It's great for seniors, too. You meet a lot of really nice people – people who volunteer and love dogs."

"Somebody told me to share my most prized possession – my pet. That's how I got into PAL," said Pat Wells, a seven-year PAL volunteer. "It makes me forget about the outside world. It makes you feel really good." Wells regularly visits the Armed Forces Retirement Home with a group. "We visit people upstairs in the long-term facility, but we're also with the people who are retirees – they drive and come and go as they please. They love it when people bring their families!"

### Good Dog

"Ninety-nine point nine percent of the time," Wallis estimated, "we find that people know their dogs. People know if their dog is right for this." The temperament check begins with a group of 10 to 20 dogs, along with their owners in a one-hour session on a Saturday morning at the AFRH (3700 North Capitol St. NE). Dogs demonstrate how they can follow simple commands (for a treat), and then there's a little play-acting. "We see how dogs are around walkers, how they do in elevators," said Wallis. "We see how they react to a shaking hand. To dogs it may feel like a shaking hand is poking at them. We see if they bark or growl."

"PAL is not as strict on obedience as other organizations," said Wells. "They're looking for dogs that are under your control and good with people. And there are different venues for different dogs," she continued. "At the Episcopal Children's Center

... the dogs are a reward program. They're off-leash, the kids are throwing the ball – it's active. Many of the children only know dogs in a negative way and think that they bite. PAL visits are good because the kids learn that dogs are friendly and fun to be around."

### Get Involved

Only about 10 Hill residents are PAL volunteers. PAL could be the perfect volunteer opportunity for dog owners. It's great for families with dogs – kids can put in community service hours and the family can be together for a fulfilling activity.

A challenge is getting enough volunteers to cover all the facilities eager for PAL's return or the organizations waiting for their first visit. "More sites want pet visits," said Wallis. "The demand is incredible! Many facilities have nice grounds to walk around on, so it's great to take the dog for a walk after the hour visit."

To participate, please go to PAL's website ([www.peopleanimalslove.org](http://www.peopleanimalslove.org)) or call 202-966-2171. There's a \$100 orientation donation, plus \$25 for additional family members or friends. "It's a tax-deductible donation," said PAL Volunteer Coordinator John Davison. "These orientation donations are critical in order to pay for the pet visit program. Most of our visits are with seniors, many of whom are Alzheimer's patients, and it is notoriously difficult to raise money for programs that help seniors – it's not glamorous. What's great, though, is that our volunteers do think it's important enough to not only volunteer their time, but to donate for an orientation spot," he said. "They do great work."

*This is part of a monthly series profiling nonprofits that serve our community. To suggest an organization to be profiled, please e-mail Heather Schoell at [hschoell@verizon.net](mailto:hschoell@verizon.net) with "suggestion" in the subject line. ★*

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