

FURRY FRIENDS

Whether it's a long-time pet we have at home that keeps us physically and mentally active or a pet-therapy visit, animals have a positive impact on those living with cancer

by MICHAELA REAM

King Frederick of Prussia first said a dog is "man's best friend" — and to this day, his words still ring true. Humans have an undeniable connection with our furry, four-legged companions, which has both physical and mental benefits, especially for those living with cancer.

Animal support has been around since the ancient Greeks, and the tradition has continued in Calgary and Edmonton. Indeed, animal visits can help lower blood pressure, improve anxiety and heart rate and can make us feel happier, according to an article by *Complementary Health Practice Review*.

Bev Koo volunteers in Edmonton with her two Australian Labradoodles, Messi and Knotty, providing furry support to both the Cross Cancer Institute pet therapy and the Stollery Children's Hospital. In Calgary, Chad Moore volunteers with the Pet Access League Society (PALS) with his purebred black pug, Yoda.



PALS visits aren't just with dogs! Of more than 400 volunteers, some visit with their cats, and there have also been visits with rabbits and guinea pigs.



"When you've been in the hospital for a while, you start to feel like you are part of the team, and you really can see the impact the visits have on the patients," says Koo. "Even just five minutes with the dog can make all the difference."

PALS started under the support of the Calgary SPCA in 1982 and became a separate organization in 1985. Today, PALS offers five key pet-therapy programs focusing on mental health support within the local community. These include the Pet Visitation Program, StoryPALS, Puppy Rooms, PawsitivePALS and Pre-Board Pals.



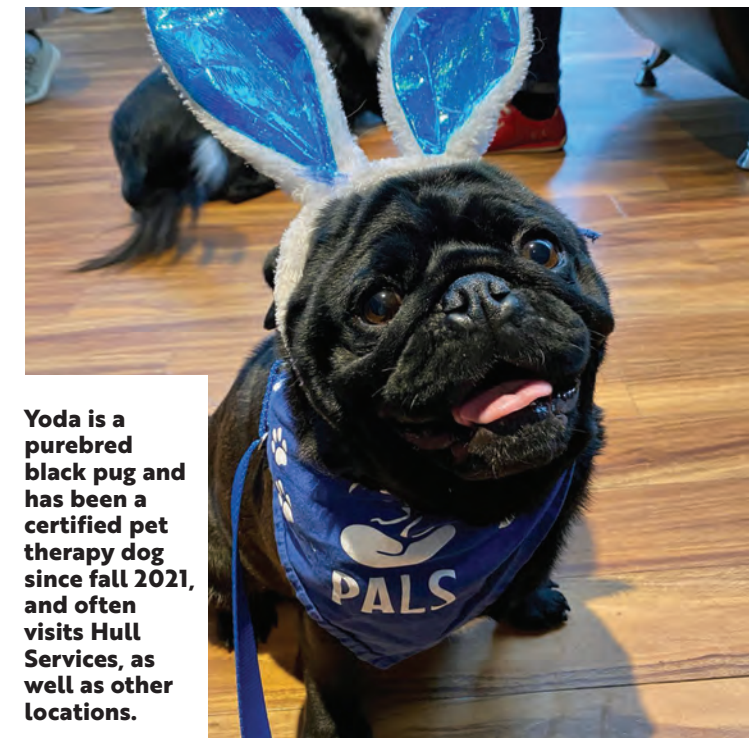
Messi (named after soccer star Lionel Messi) is a five-year-old Australian Labradoodle, has been a certified therapy dog since fall 2018 and has worked at the Cross Cancer Institute since 2021.



Service dogs and therapy dogs are separate jobs! A service dog is trained to perform specific tasks to help someone living with a disability. Therapy dogs provide emotional support in places such as schools and hospitals.



Knotty is a three-quarter Australian Labradoodle and one-quarter St. Bernard. She turned three in August and has been a certified therapy dog since January 2022 with the Stollery Children's Hospital.



Yoda is a purebred black pug and has been a certified pet therapy dog since fall 2021, and often visits Hull Services, as well as other locations.



Weekly visits last between 60 to 90 minutes, but at the end of the day, Knotty and Messi get to enjoy being regular dogs.

Most dogs can be therapy dogs as long as they have the right temperament, such as being calm, friendly and affectionate around strangers. The certification process involves basic obedience training and socializing in different situations, new places, objects and people, to prepare for the bustle of hospital or school visits.

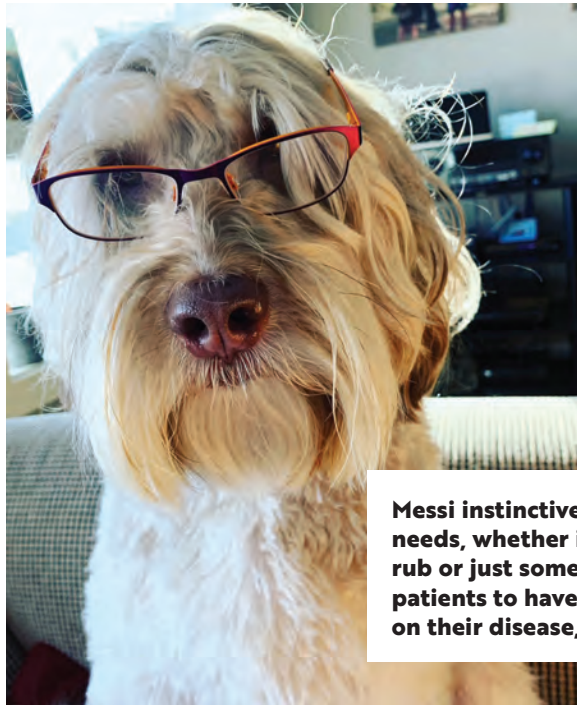


“Yoda is super excited to start and full of energy. As the visit goes on, the excitement changes to cuddles, pets and hugs. The visits we do really give back,” says Moore.



“Everyone loves Yoda,” says Moore. “The best feedback was a drawing of Yoda from a youth at Hull Services who was there for Yoda’s first visit. It’s on my computer and reminds me daily my issues aren’t so big, and our visits mean more than I’ll know.”

Most therapy dogs work for an hour to an hour and a half before they need a break.



Messi instinctively knows what a patient needs, whether it’s a laugh, hug, belly rub or just someone to talk to. “It allows patients to have a moment of not focusing on their disease,” says Koo.



One memory that stands out, Koo recalls, was a visit with Knotty to Stollery, where they visited a little girl in palliative care. “Knotty would get into bed with the little girl and let her lean against her and put her face right on her and talk to her and say ‘Knotty, I love you,’” says Koo. “That was the most impactful visit.”



PALS also provides visits for staff members who need just as much furry attention to recharge during long shifts.