



Louise Westfall, Good Samaritan Center resident, gets a kiss from Sam, the center's Labrador retriever. Dogs — and pets in general — can provide emotional and physical benefits for all people, experts said at a recent human-animal bond symposium.

Below, Sam shows that a lack of affection can have the same depressing effect on dogs.

## Dog lends helping paw to ailing residents of convalescent home

Every morning, Sam, a golden-haired Labrador retriever, jaunts down the hallways of the Good Samaritan Center, his paw pads clicking against the tile floor as he makes his daily rounds.

He'll stop inside residents' rooms, tail in perpetual wagging motion, and nuzzle a cold snout against their bodies. Sometimes he'll plant a wet kiss on them.

Residents smile when they see Sam coming, an observation which hasn't escaped Gunter Brunk's eyes. Brunk, director of the center which houses 148 people, frequently overheard residents reminisce about their childhood pets. Maybe a pet would make the convalescent center more homey, Brunk thought.

Brunk's unscientific observation has been documented scientifically: contact with animals is physically, as well as emotionally, beneficial for human beings.

The results speak for themselves, Brunk says.

"It was amazing when we first got Sam. There was a resident here who hadn't talked at all for months, and she just started talking (after Sam came). People just get excited when he comes in and jumps up and down," Brunk says of the one-year-old retriever.

In the past three years, research on what scientists dub Animal Facilitated Therapy has blossomed.

Although animal lovers intuitively have known for years the importance animals have in their lives, only recently have scientists stumbled upon empirical data which backs pet owners' hunches.

For example, scientists at the University of Pennsylvania were researching influential factors on recovery rates of heart attack victims. As a quirk, researchers checked which victims were pet owners and which weren't.

**Although pets cannot replace traditional medicine in every case, they are an 'adjunctive measure.'**

Their findings were surprising, says Eugene veterinarian Jerry Boggs, who directed the Oregon Human-Animal Bond Symposium on Saturday at the Valley River Inn.

Compared with non-pet owners, the recovery rate of pet owners was "astounding," Boggs says. An estimated 70 percent of the pet owners successfully recovered from heart attacks, compared to about 30 percent of non-pet owners.

Similar studies have shown that simply stroking an animal lowers both the human's and the animal's blood pressure. Yet a human's blood pressure rises during conversation with another human being.

Even watching fish lowers human blood pressure, Boggs says, and some dentists are catching on to this by putting aquariums in their offices.

Scientists are still unsure why animals exert positive effects on humans — but they have their hunches.

"Where else can you find a 'pill' that gives you unconditional love," says Leo Bustad, a professor of veterinary medicine and former dean of the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Bustad is one of the nation's leading authorities on the human-animal bond relationship. He spoke at the symposium on therapeutic use of animals with the physically disabled.

"You can be the ugliest person and an animal will still love you," Bustad says. Animals are especially useful for someone who lives alone because they "socialize you and require you to take them out for walks. Animals give you security," he says.

Louise Westfall, a resident of Good Samaritan Center, says she's known all her life that animals are special.

"I have all the respect in the world for dogs

because they're loyal. You can trust a dog, but you can't trust a human," Westfall says.

Everybody sits up when Sam comes," she says. "I've never seen him cross a human being. Everybody loves Sam and everybody respects him. You've got to be something special to have that kind of reputation."

University psychologist Ray Lowe says that besides "putting up with a lot of crap," pets elicit the nurturing instinct in human beings.

"The human organism strives to be useful. Helping an animal survive and grow is when you feel your best," he says. "An animal cannot substitute for a human. But they stimulate people to move into meeting other people."

Other mental health professionals are beginning to recognize the benefits of owning a pet. Portland psychiatrist Michael McCulloch was one of the first psychiatrists to prescribe pets to some of his patients. Although pets cannot replace traditional medicine in every case, pets are an "adjunctive measure," says McCulloch, who also spoke at the symposium.

Individuals who often benefit from pet prescriptions usually have one of the following

symptoms: depression, physical illness, absence of humor or recent role reversal into a negative dependency, McCulloch says.

"By using such highly selective criteria with

physical health.

"I doubt cardiologists will start recommending that people buy a dog to deal with heart problems. But if people have an inclination to

do that, I hope cardiologists and psychologists will welcome them to do so," Boggs says.

McCulloch says he would not "prescribe" a pet to someone who has never had a pet or to someone who doesn't like animals.

Although 55 percent of all American homes have pets, a large percentage of Americans — about 40 percent — aren't happy with their pets and treat them disrespectfully.

An estimated 11 to 13 million animals are put to sleep each year. But as long as Good Samaritan residents have a say in their pet's well-being, Sam doesn't have any worries.

"Kiss me, baby," says Westfall to the Labrador retriever. With a juicy smack of his tongue, Sam obliges.

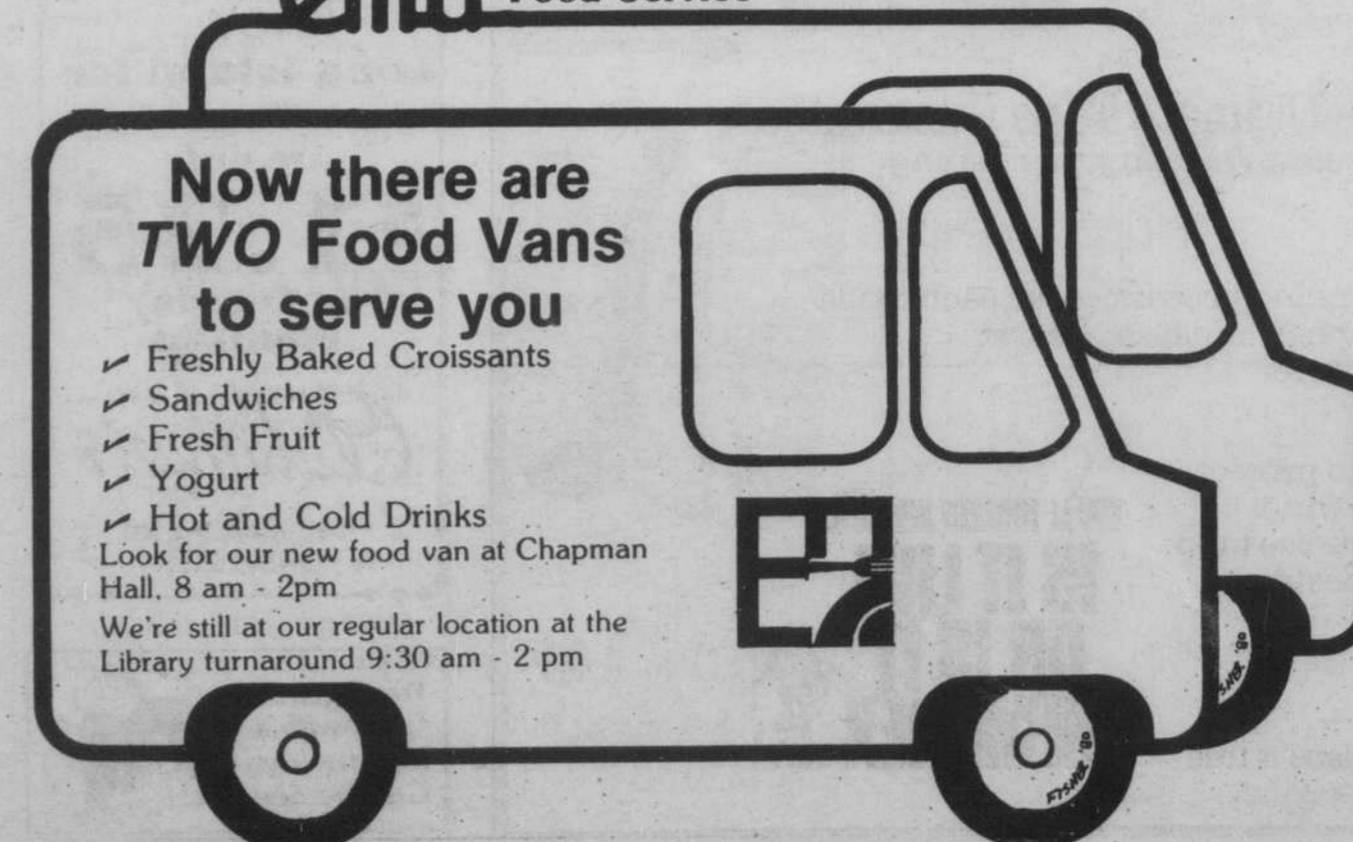


sensibility and good judgement, you can recommend a pet as you would recommend a drug," he says.

But pets are not the be-all, end-all to medicine, Boggs says, and people should view them as another alternative to good mental and physical health.

**Story by Joan Herman  
Photos by Dave Kao**

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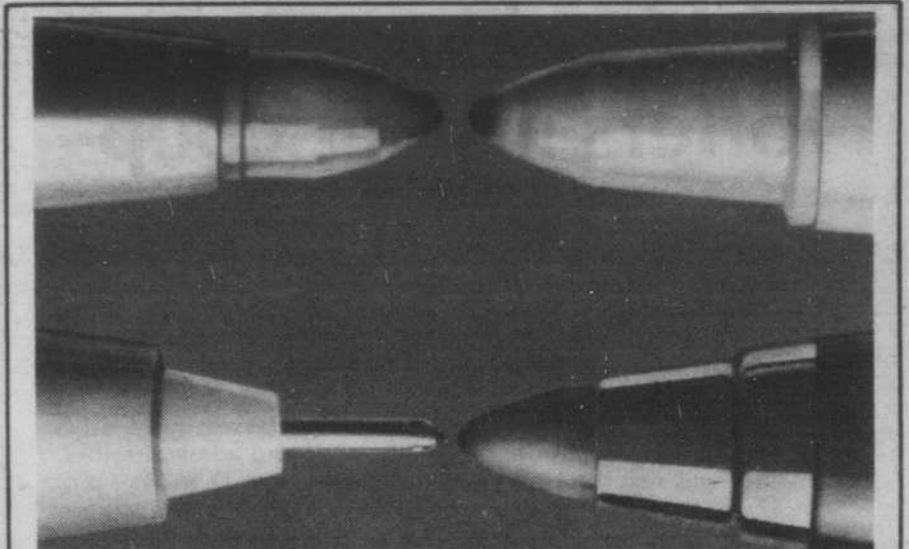
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