

Equine therapy is strong medicine for residents

Animals bring joy to nursing home

By Carol Wolfram
St. Tammany bureau

Annie Evans left her room at the Lacombe Nursing Centre to wander her father's farm, laughing as the family horse stepped gingerly down the bank of a gully for a drink of cool water. Her father fussed that the horse might bolt, but Annie just smiled, knowing the animal's next move. After he'd had his fill, the horse moved back up the bank and galloped straight to the barn. "He didn't tarry a bit," Evans said.

For the 81-year-old New Orleans native, who no longer has her vision, the remembrance was as vivid as if it were unfolding before her very eyes.

"There's nothing like animals and music to reach a person," said Laura Cahill, director of volunteers with the Concerned Care Home Health and Hospice program in Covington. "Annie can't see a thing, but when she's remembering, she's seeing everything."

The happy memory was a gift prompted during a visit by Eli, a 1-year-old miniature horse with the Equestrian Angel Therapeutic Outreach Program.

It's also just the type of therapeutic magic Eli's owners, registered nurses Ken and Jennifer Roché of Jefferson, La., witness frequently when they come calling with the tiny, brown-and-white Eli and his 14-month-old stablemate, Vince.

Created with the mission "to brighten someone else's day" with a form of nursing that nourishes a person's mental, spiritual and emotional health, Equestrian Angel's equine therapy program is staffed by the Rochés during the Lacombe Nursing Centre visit, Vince and Eli, sporting bright blue dog paw coverings over their hooves, were led from patient to patient by Jennifer Roché. Their luxurious coats, made ultra-soft by a series of "beauty secrets" to which Roche alludes but never divulges, were stroked and their muzzles, smooched.

The program and the reactions it prompts are a dream come true for Ken Roché, a

registered nurse since 1993 who launched Equestrian Angel in January. He, Vince and Eli average four visits a week to nursing homes or hospice patients throughout the region. The sessions are provided at no charge and last as long as people want. "I stay until people have had enough of them," he said.

Sometimes, that means a visit that last for more than an hour, as was the case at the Lacombe Nursing Centre, where residents such as 72-year-old Charlotte Kippers startled her daughter, Bonde Schruff of Covington, when she ceased a repetitive speech pattern almost immediately after she began to stroke Eli's strong neck. "I like him," Kippers said, as clear as a bell. Schruff beamed at the reaction, commenting, "She normally chants, but I'm not surprised; she's always loved animals."

Ken Roché has become accustomed to such responses to Vince and Eli.

"It's a hard thing to describe. You've just got to experience it. Things like that happen all the time. You see people who can't speak, speak to them. You see people who can't move, move to touch them," Roché said.

Sondra McHenry, assistant activities director at the Lacombe Nursing Centre, said pet therapy has well-documented benefits. And while dogs and cats are the more familiar dispensers of such affection at their facility, Vince and Eli already have established a growing fan club among the center's staff and residents. "They enjoy the social interaction. It's good therapy for them," she said.

Anna Menge, 92, of Slidell, agreed, wondering aloud, "Wouldn't you love it if you could read their minds?" she asked, before adding resolutely, "I want one. He can share my room."

For information on the Equestrian Angel Therapeutic Outreach Program, including inquiries regarding sponsorships or volunteer opportunities, contact Cahill at Concerned Care Home Health and Hospice at 985.327.0574 or 985.630.0927.

Carol Wolfram can be reached at
cwolfram@timespicayune.com or
985.645.2857.

Zone 2014 THE PICTURE SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 1, 2014



PHOTOS BY CHUCK COOK / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Resident Annie Evans, 81, smiles as she touches a miniature horse named Eli that is held by Ken Roché at Lacombe Nursing Centre on Oct. 21. Roché is founder of Equestrian Angels and brings his little horses to area nursing home to pick up the spirits of the residents.



Resident Anna Menge, 92, kisses a miniature horse named Vince at the Lacombe Nursing Centre on Oct. 21.