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# THE WEEKLY PACKET

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## News Feature

### Blue Hill

### Therapy Dogs: They serve by “being there”

By JONATHAN THOMAS

One point became clear as Anne Williams began her September 26 talk entitled “Dog Therapy in Hancock County,” she would not be discussing dogs with problems that needed help. Instead, it was about dogs, such as her Irish Wolfhound Honor, that provides therapy to humans.

Honor is not just an ordinary dog. One first notices his size. He is three feet tall at the shoulders, weighs 187 pounds, and if standing on his hind legs, would be more than seven and one-half feet tall. When he goes to work he wears a red coat or vest over his back. The coat has round blue embroidered patches on each side that read “Therapy Dogs International” and “Paws Awhile for Love.” Attached are a set of metal tags and laminated ID badges that provide Honor with access to the jails, hospitals and nursing homes where he works.

Williams takes Honor to a



*Anne Williams, certified handler of therapy dogs, answers question from the audience while sitting next to her dog “Honor,” an Irish Wolfhound.*

*Photo by Jonathan Thomas*

jail or other facility several times a week. Although what the dog does may not appear to be demanding, she says that at the end of a work session Honor needs to rest. Williams emphasized, “The welfare of my dog is paramount. On the whole he does enjoy [providing this type of therapy]. But...he puts a lot into it that you don’t realize. The dog is extending himself to that person in need—he’s exhausted when we come home.” Then at home, he is just like any other dog that lies around, eats his meals, wants to go for his walk and watches television.

“Volunteers for Hancock Jail Residents” sponsored the program at the St. Francis Church in Blue Hill. This group provides a variety of programs for education and health to jail inmates. An audience of about 30 people sat the front pews of the church and listened as Williams described many of her experiences, both at the local jail, and previously when she lived in the New York City area. Women in particular, who are separated from their children, will spend such long periods just brushing the dog that she joked that it is a wonder that Honor has any hair left. She has observed that interactions between a therapy dog and men are likely to be more restrained, especially if the men are in a group.

One of several stories she told was her experience in providing assistance in New

York after 9/11. She had previously become well known for her services to area hospitals and other agencies. “Two days after the 9/11 disaster they called and asked me to come in, with Cartier, my dog at that time, to see the firemen at the 52nd precinct. It was an unbelievable experience. [Television coverage] does not fully describe what these men were going through in terms of the rescue. They were traumatized, they were burned, they were crying, they were under incredible stress. And then I came in with Cartier—he came in and lay down in the middle of the floor. And all these great big men [were there], with tears streaming down their faces, and open wounds, and open burns and incredible sores. Cartier licked the tears from their faces, and never touched an open wound. So what he brought to those men was really wonderful. It wasn’t a cute little fuzzy lap dog. That would not have done it. They needed something that was big and strong and gentle and loving.”

According to literature from Therapy Dogs International, Inc., “It has been clinically proven that through petting, touching and talking with the animals, patients’ blood pressure is lowered, stress is relieved and depression is lowered.” This organization has established standards that are “extremely high” for this activity, according to Williams. She described the rigorous training that dogs

and their handlers go through before testing and certification. Dogs may be of other breeds or mixed breed—with the major requirement being that the dog be temperamentally suited to be a therapy dog.

Anne Williams lives in Stonington with her husband Luke, along with two other Irish Wolfhounds.

For more information on Volunteers for Hancock County Jails, call Judy Garvey at 374-2437 or 374-3608 or visit [www.jailvolunteers.org](http://www.jailvolunteers.org).



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