

Char and Her “Newfies” Take Pet Therapy to a National Level

Four years ago Emma, the bear-like Newfoundland well known as a pet therapy dog at Holland Hospital, became a certified member of Animal Assisted Crisis Response (AACR), an elite team of dogs specially trained to provide emotional rescue and support in crisis situations throughout the country. Now that she’s retired, Emma’s four-year-old niece, Lily, has taken on her pet therapy duties.


Last month Lily and her human partner, Char Nash, a Boven Birth Center RN, advanced to type 2 disaster certification with the AACR. Training included an intensive, four-day crisis intervention and disaster mental-health program in 2007, and recent incident command classes taken online.

“We’re trained in critical incident stress management,” explains Nash. “We call it an emotional recovery rather than search and rescue. It’s pet therapy taken to the next level.”

The AACR works with national disaster-relief organizations including the American Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), as well as local police and fire departments. When an AACR “call out” occurs, Nash and Lily go where they’re needed, provided Nash’s work schedule allows. Recently they were summoned to the funeral for police officer James Szuba and his K-9 partner in South Bend, Ind. Nash estimates there were 1,000 people there, and Lily was a comforting presence.

“She can sense when a person’s hurting and she’ll go right up to that person,” Nash says. “She’ll lean against them. If they’re sitting down, she’ll sit in their lap.”

Previously, Nash has volunteered with Emma for call outs in Texas following Hurricane Katrina, at Northern Illinois University after a gunman killed six people in 2008, and in Iowa following a devastating tornado. Both dogs accompanied her to schools in Coopersville, Mich., after slayings and accidents claimed 10 lives in 2008, and Nash and Lily recently volunteered in Spring Lake following a fatal sledding accident. They are one of only three AACR “Newfie” teams in the nation.



Char Nash, RN, and her pet therapy “girls” Emma, left, and Lily are well known at Holland Hospital.

In addition to being active in Holland Hospital’s Pet Therapy Program, Char Nash is one of the Lakeshore area’s only certified “tester/ observers” for Therapy Dogs, Inc., which registers pet therapy programs throughout the country. Interested in having your dog join? Here are some basics.

Pet Therapy 101

To qualify as a pet therapy dog, Fido must:

- be well-mannered and friendly.
- not display aggression toward people or other animals.
- be at least 1 year old before applying.
- pass three “observations” which test for basic obedience.
- have a veterinarian’s signature.

Pet owners begin the certification process by applying to Therapy Dogs, Inc. For an application or for more information, contact Char Nash at 394-3324 or charna@hollandhospital.org.