

SARASOTA COUNTY

Pets help brighten the lives of senior citizens

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An elderly woman wheels her way down the hallway leading to the activities center at IHS Venice North -- as she and other residents do every Tuesday around 3 p.m.

There she finds about 30 residents waiting eagerly for a special visit; the room fills with guests and staff as the hour nears.

Meanwhile, in the parking lot, Kathy Alexander readies her bichon frises and their pups for their weekly visit to the assisted living home.

As she proceeds, the residents stop her. They want a closer look at the puppies. They want to touch and hold them.

"It brings back memories of my dogs," said Rushia Snow, 89. "People here really want to see these animals, especially those who had pets."

Alexander started Pet Therapy Inc., a nonprofit organization, in 1997 after realizing how much people enjoyed petting and looking at her dog when she visited her father-in-law at an assisted-living facility.

Going through a divorce and unfulfilled by running her own marketing company, she needed to focus her life. Pet Therapy became that focus, she said.

"It was a calling from God. I love dogs, I love the elderly, and I love kids," Alexander said.

The one-woman organization has grown to include 40 adult and 30 children volunteers serving more than 20 nursing homes and assisted-living facilities in Sarasota County.



Often in the mornings Kathy Alexander takes her Bichon Frises on runs at Arlington Park, in Sarasota.



Kathy Alexander softly caresses Nancy Cordell's cheek with a 5-week-old puppy during a recent visit to IHS Venice North.

Her recent visit to IHS Venice North, 437 S. Nokomis, indicates the impact the program has on the residents.

After a few stops, the dogs enter a room filled with happy faces, anticipation and hope. Residents carefully reach out to touch the dogs walking freely among the many wheelchairs.

The dogs stop at the feet of familiar residents and raise their paws on residents' laps, as if to say hello.

As they continue through the crowd, the dogs stop at Marian Aust's wheelchair, raise their paws and look for their weekly treat.

Aust, 90, slowly unfolds a plastic bag full of bread crumbs and feeds them. "I just love them," she says with a big smile.

Alexander hands 5-week-old puppies to some residents. She has to be careful because not all are able to hold the puppies, but those who are, caress and kiss the pups.

"I like the little ones," says Howard Copperchite, 92. "I like them because they are easier to handle."

On the other side of the room, Alexander caresses a resident's face with one of the puppies. She wants everyone to be able to participate.

Alexander constantly shows affection to the animals, talking to them, playing with them, petting them and kissing them. She shows the same feelings for the residents of the facilities she visits. She knows everyone's name.

"I think what she does is very important for this and any nursing home, because people need contact with animals. It is good therapy. It helps calm people, and it gives them confidence," said Bruce Parsons, activity aide at IHS Venice North. "I used to bring my own dog to do room visits; she did that for six years."

To raise money for the nonprofit organization, Alexander raises puppies until they are 8 to 12 weeks old and sells them to good homes.

In some cases, she gives dogs away to people who might benefit from having a companion.

The dogs are affectionate, but they need love, too, she said.

Parting the mother, Sara Sota, her four puppies -- Lido, Sikoshi, Takusan and Westway -- and the stud, Baird, will never happen, she says. After all, they make up the Pet Therapy logo.

Along with the money raised from the sale of the dogs, donations from individuals and charitable organizations help cover Alexander's costs.

After two years of touching the lives of the elderly, she has received many thank-you letters.

Among them is a letter from Shelley A. Stout, activities director at The Springs at Lake Pointe Woods, an assisted-living facility in Sarasota. The letter reads: "To see our residents' faces brighten up, and smile and cry with joy, is such a delight."