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## Canine Companions Impact FM

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## Canine Companions Impact FM

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By: Elisabeth Deffner

Reprinted from FM Online

Nancy Gordon has no trouble remembering her first encounter with a Mexican hairless dog, a Xoloitzcuintli. Renowned for their intense body heat, Xolos (pronounced sho-loos) have been used as therapy dogs for centuries—and Gordon soon discovered why.

“I put my wrists under his belly where I was having wrist pain,” says the Southern California resident. “After about 15 minutes, my pain was relieved.”

Small wonder that she decided to get a Xolo of her very own. “I’m going to get one of these dogs, put it around my neck, and call it Toaster,” she thought.

Because the breeder was aware how Gordon intended to make use of her Xolo’s body heat, she periodically placed the puppy on people’s necks, getting the dog accustomed to the unusual position. Little Toaster took to the work immediately.

Gordon and Toaster have been featured in *Fibromyalgia AWARE*, “Animal Planet,” and many other venues, though it’s not news that animals can help people feel better. A UCLA study found that dog owners required much less medical care for stress-induced aches and pains than people who don’t own dogs, and in a study from New York’s City Hospital, it was found that heart patients who owned pets were significantly more likely than those who didn’t own pets to live at least a year after they were discharged from the hospital.

It must be admitted, though, that Gordon’s particular brand of “pet therapy” is unique. And her Xolos—Toaster and her daughter Pink—have changed her life in wholly unexpected ways.

Born with a kneecap problem, Pink eventually had to have one of her hind legs amputated. Though she has to compensate for the lack of her leg—relieving herself can be a challenge, as can climbing the ramp onto Gordon’s bed—Pink doesn’t seem to miss it much.

Her body heat is higher than Toaster’s, and she’s better at retrieval than her mother, too. But even more importantly, it’s Pink’s reaction to her physical challenge that has impacted Gordon’s life.

“Pink and Toaster used to have ritual in the morning; I’d let them out the back door and they’d race,” Gordon says. One morning, after Pink’s leg was amputated, the dogs began their race—but this time was different.

“Pink slipped on a bend, trying to go around the corner. She fell. My heart just sank,” Gordon recalls. “I started to well up, and before I had time to get a tear out she was up and after Toaster. I looked up and thought, ‘Wow, look at what she has done to accept what she has.’

“Above just loving me for who I am and what I am, they have really inspired me to have the determination to do whatever I ... need to do.”

### Service Dogs

Gordon has started an organization to connect other people with Xolos: [X-CPR \(Xolos Chronic Pain Relief\)](#). And she worked with [Leashes for Living](#) to train her Xolos; this San Diego-based program allows people with disabilities to train their own service dogs.

Programs across the country help people with health challenges connect with service dogs. [Domesti-PUPS](#) is one of these. Founded by Michelle Ashley, Domesti-PUPS is a volunteer-driven organization that places dogs with people who have special needs, as well as in classroom situations and pet therapy programs.

The dogs are raised in foster homes from about eight weeks to 14 months, getting basic training and socialization. Then they return to Domesti-PUPS for evaluation. The organization determines the dogs’ strengths—whether they would be best working with someone in a wheelchair, for instance—and then sends them to an Alabama team of

volunteers for finish training and placement. (Clients must attend a 13-day training camp before returning home with their dogs.)

About 20 percent of DP's clients are FM patients—including Ashley herself, though she was not diagnosed until a year after she started the organization.

Ashley can barely contain her excitement when she begins talking about the benefits of a service dog: the constant companionship, the independence they allow a patient to develop, a shift in focus from one's disability to the dog.

"I think we heighten the visibility of FM, not just making it that condition that 'is in your head,'" she adds.

"We know what it is like, we know how we can help, and we are there for our clients to help them live more independent lives. I couldn't work without my dog, and that would impact my self esteem greatly, so I am grateful to be able to live on my own and continue living my life the way I want to."

Resources

In addition to X-CPR and Domesti-PUPS, there are organizations across the country that train and place service dogs with people who have disabilities. Check these out:

The Delta Society is a proponent of service dogs. On the website you can find a list of service dog organizations all around the country.

Connect with people who have trained their own assistance dogs at the Yahoo!Group Owner Trained Assistance Dogs: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ot-adogs/>

Find more lists of service dog training associations at American Dog Trainers Network

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Please always consult with your physician on matters concerning your medical care and treatment.

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