

Furry therapy

Buddy is award project for Girl Scout

BY RUTH INGRAM • RINGRAM@CLARIONLEDGER.COM • DECEMBER 23, 2010



When he walks down the halls of retirement homes, this Labrador-wolfhound mix is everybody's Buddy.

The big black dog with a long and wagging tail is easy to spot. He wears a blue bandanna and identification tag and badge to let folks know he's a trained, certified therapy dog. "He loves Trinity. Every time we come here, his tail just pops up," his owner and trainer, 17-year-old Lauren Wilson of Clinton, said during one of Buddy's jaunts to Trinity Mission Health and Rehabilitation.

Buddy is much more than a family pet. Wilson chose him from a Ruston, La., shelter specifically because he had the makings of becoming a therapy dog trained to give comfort and companionship to those in hospitals and nursing homes. Buddy is her Gold Award project. A Clinton High senior and member of Clinton Girl Scout Troop 5429 since third grade, Wilson is working to achieve the Girl Scout movement's top award, the equivalent of an Eagle Scout designation.

To accomplish such a unique Gold Award project, Wilson has worked tirelessly for more than a year to train Buddy, then schedule and take him for visits to area nursing homes. "Let's just say it's the most expensive, time-consuming Gold project she could have chosen," mom Jennifer Wilson laughs. Both Lauren Wilson and Buddy went through the rigors of training. Not just Buddy, but Wilson must be certified by the group Therapy Dogs International in order for them to function as a therapy dog team.

"It starts out with the basics. He has to walk up to a can of food and leave it alone. He has to not flinch at loud noises. He can have no aggression at all, and no jumping," Lauren Wilson said. A Jackson-area dog obedience club was authorized to test Wilson and Buddy. "From the time she got him to the time they passed was one year, May to May. We've been visiting nursing homes ever since," Jennifer Wilson said.

When Buddy and his handler visited Trinity on Dec. 17, it was obvious that Wilson was in control. Buddy obeyed her verbal and hand commands, but did affectionately sit on her at times as he was petted and admired by the home's residents.

To many, Buddy's no stranger. Veronica Ferguson, 63, let Buddy bathe her face in kisses. She said little to him. It wasn't necessary. "Oh, I love him. He makes me feel good," Ferguson said later. "He makes me love him."

"Hello, Buddy! Buddy's a sweet dog," resident Faye Williams, 83, of Clinton told him as she stroked his head and ears.

That day, it was resident Myra Robinson's 85th birthday. Buddy gifted her with kisses. "Oh! Look at the baby!" Robinson said over and over as she reached out her hands. Lauren and Jennifer Wilson have seen firsthand the magic that Buddy can do with a wave of his tail and some bedside vigilance. "We've heard stroke patients say complete sentences to him that they wouldn't do for anyone else," Jennifer Wilson said. Wilson's Gold Award project "is very much above and beyond what we would expect," said Debbie Harris of Clinton, her longtime leader.

Two other Girl Scouts in Harris' troop are working on their Gold Award requirements. Hannah Weisenberger, a senior at St. Joseph Catholic High, is creating a database of all patients and families that have ever stayed at the Ronald McDonald House in Jackson. Angie Rao, a Clinton High senior, has collected magazines and made children's goody bags for the Blair E. Batson Children's Hospital at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

"I think it's very ambitious," Harris said of Wilson's project. "For the Gold Award, they have to do 60 hours of service. She's gone way beyond that, especially with the training that she's put Buddy through." Employees at Trinity say the welcome mat is out for Buddy. "Our residents enjoy the interaction with dogs and pet therapy. We wish we could have more volunteers," said administrator Chad Blackledge.

Wilson said she didn't think twice about taking on Buddy as her Gold Award project, even though she knew it would be a huge undertaking in her senior year of high school. "If I'd done something like a toy drive, it would end that day," Wilson said.

"With this ... He's my dog. He goes home with me every night, and he sleeps on my couch."