

# ANIMALS CONNECTING PEOPLE TO PEOPLE: INSIGHTS INTO ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY AND ANIMAL-ASSISTED ACTIVITIES

**Caroline B. Schaffer, DVM, Tuskegee University**

*In this narrative the author reflects on the interactions she has seen between nursing home residents and the veterinary medical students and their behavior-tested and health-screened pets who have participated in Tuskegee University's PUPS Program that she has supervised for 17 years. She concludes that the magic that drives this labor-intensive and highly emotional program world-wide is not the human-animal bond but the human-animal-human bond.*

I never expected to volunteer at a nursing home. True, I had smuggled Lizzie, my little eight-pound Pekingese dog, into a nursing home in 1977 to visit her namesake, Elizabeth Faulkner, on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. It is also true that my decision to be a veterinarian was based in part on my belief that healthy animals provide joy for people of all ages. Nevertheless, going to nursing homes just was not my thing.

Now that I work at Tuskegee University's College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health in Tuskegee, Alabama, I am immersed in animal-assisted therapy/animal-assisted activities (AAT/AAA). My goal is to assure that animals and people have safe and satisfying visits with one another regardless of the person's age, mental state, or physical ability. My activities over the past 17 years have included:

- 1) Helping to design and administer a behavior test to screen animal applicants for AAT/AAA (Schaffer & Phillips, 1993).

- 2) Advising the Pets Uplifting People's Spirits (PUPS) AAT/AAA program at Tuskegee University's School of Veterinary Medicine.

- 3) Serving as the AAT/AAA liaison for the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System in Tuskegee.

- 4) Overseeing visits to the nursing home by veterinary medical students and their behavior-tested and health-screened pets.

- 5) Volunteering with my dogs who have passed the behavior-testing and health-screening.

Over the years I have asked myself what got me started. What made me spend so much time and give so much of myself when I didn't know any of the nursing home residents and I wasn't attached to any particular nursing home? The answer, it seems, has to do with what people often call the human-animal bond.

## **Defining the Bond**

The human-animal bond is defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association's Committee on the Human-Animal Bond as:

*A mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment. The veterinarian's role in the human-animal bond is to maximize the potentials of the relationship between people and other animals. (Committee on the Human-Animal Bond, 1998, p. 1975)*

To be honest, I would never have gone to this particular nursing home in Tuskegee if it were not for my dogs. After some soul searching, my first thought was that I wanted to share my dogs' love with others. With deeper introspection, I realized that I liked



seeing people light up and smile when they saw **MY** dogs. Note the emphasis on the word "my."

I have also asked myself why I help veterinary medical students become AAT/AAA volunteers. Yes, it is fun to see the enthusiasm of the students. I enjoy teaching them how to do a behavior test. But, again, the reality is that I am rewarded when I see pets interacting appropriately at nursing homes. I like knowing that pets taking the PUPS Behavior Test have a chance to say, through their body language, how they feel about the sights, sounds, odors, and activities that they might encounter at the nursing home.

### **Human-Animal Bond in Action**

The interactions between pets and nursing home residents in Tuskegee over the years have been amazing. On our very first visit, we had one of those magical human-animal bond moments. Caroline, a veterinary medical student and president of the Tuskegee University Chapter of the American Association of Feline Practitioners, took Heckyl the cat on that first visit. Heckyl was the only cat among many dogs. Each of us had tried to visit with a gentleman curled up in a wheelchair. His arms were contracted and his eyes were lowered. We didn't know anything about his physical or mental state. He appeared to be in his own world, showing no reaction to any of the dogs. Carolyn approached him with Heckyl. She asked if he wanted to see her cat. She got no response so she and Heckyl moved to the next resident. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw the gentleman watching Heckyl. She returned to his side and was pleased to watch as he quietly mouthed "pretty kitty." For a moment, Carolyn was pleased. She was then startled as she looked up and saw many of the nursing home staff members rushing toward them. She asked what was wrong. "Nothing," she was told. "This is the first time he has spoken since he arrived at the nursing home!" I had heard about moments like this when animals draw people out of their shells, but I couldn't believe that we had one on our very first visit to this nursing home.

A small-framed, 80-something woman gave us a remarkable welcome on our first day at a different nursing home. The veterinary medical students and their dogs of all sizes, shapes, and ages gathered in the nursing home's day room. She immediately shuffled over to Pigweed, my Pekingese. She asked me a few questions about Pigweed and the other pets. Before I knew it the number of residents in the day room had nearly doubled as she ordered her fellow residents to get out of their rooms and come pet each animal. She then escorted us down the hall and into various bedrooms where she introduced us to the bed-ridden residents. It didn't matter that the nursing home's recreation therapist was to be our escort. For that day and the many months until her health failed, she was our hostess. Because of her love of animals, she told me that she wanted all residents to get the full benefit of the human-animal bond.

A thin, soft-spoken gentleman always welcomed our pets with open arms. He was an expert masseur. He would sit down and invite the larger dogs, such as Remington, a golden retriever, to rest their heads in his lap. They leaned closer to him as he massaged their head and ears. Then there was the day when we visited him in his bedroom. He invited four of the dogs, ranging in size from Remington, the Golden Retriever, to Jettabelle, a Pekingese, up on his bed. We spread our towels on top of his bedspread and arranged our dogs around him. He then began massaging. In less than five minutes, all four dogs were asleep. Jettabelle, in normal Pekingese fashion, was even snoring as she slept. I don't know whether he or the dogs benefited more from the human-animal bond that day.

I think I was most frustrated when I visited a gruff man in the smoking day room who had both legs amputated. I was frustrated because, although he was cordial to Jettabelle and Pigweed, he would give them one quick pet and then ask me, "Got a smoke?" Whenever I said, "No," he lost interest in us. But then there was the day when a student brought her cat, Ashes, to the nursing home. It was amazing! She knew nothing about how closed off he had been to all of the dogs who had tried to visit him. She greeted him, visited with



him briefly in the day room, and then headed down the hall. He wheeled himself down the hall and into every bedroom where Ashes went. By the end of the one-hour visit, the student knew where the gentleman was from, how often his family visited him, that he had been a paratrooper, and how he had lost his legs. Before he met Ashes he had the opportunity to visit many different sizes and breed of dogs accompanied by male and female students, but it was a cat who opened him up.

I remember witnessing how unimportant words are when people and animals are bonded. Missy, a Dalmation-mixed breed dog, met a normally subdued nursing home resident who wore a football helmet. He usually walked up and down the hallways, but today he was sitting in a wheelchair. Missy and her owner, who is a clinician in Tuskegee University's Small Animal Hospital, quietly approached the wheelchair. Suddenly, Missy was wiggling with pleasure and the gentleman became extremely animated. He laughed and babbled and laughed some more as the dog nestled close and asked for more hugs. They were in a world of their own, united by a special kind of love.

### **Therapist-Animal Bond**

These and many more interactions have made nursing home visits rewarding for me. Were it not for my dogs, I would not have had these rich experiences. I would have missed the opportunity to know these wonderful people. So, once again, I wonder what made me participate. In truth, I think that I am typical of the people described by Dr. Aaron Katcher, a psychiatrist who has written, lectured, and studied the human-animal bond extensively:

*Although the term "human-animal bond" is consistently evoked by people who do AAT, the therapy is almost never dependent on a persisting bond between patient and animal; instead, it is dependent on an enduring bond between the therapist and his or her animal. Perhaps the most reliable and well-documented characteristic of AAT as it is*

*currently practiced is the devotion of the volunteer therapists...and their faith in the value of contact with their beloved pet for clients or patients. (Katcher, 2000, p. 466)*

### **My Idealized Self-Objects**

For me, the theory of self-psychology as applied to the human-animal bond also seems to explain my motivation to participate in AAT/AAA with my Pekingese dogs. According to research by Dr. Sue-Ellen Brown, a clinical psychologist in the Center for the Study of Human-Animal Interdependent Relationships at Tuskegee University's College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health, animals are considered to be self-objects when they give and maintain cohesion to a person's sense of self. To be a self-object the animal must hold together the individual person's inner psychological experience (Brown, 2007).

Animals are said to be idealizing self-objects when they provide "someone to look up to; identify with; and admire for their strength, calmness, wisdom, or goodness" (Brown, 2007, p. 329). An idealized self-object strengthens or enhances self-esteem and reinvigorates the self. It is often seen as having qualities or abilities that the person lacks. Pigweed, Jettabelle, and Booker T. (my three Pekingese who are qualified as therapy dogs) were outgoing and seemed comfortable when touched and admired by strangers. As for me, I am not a touchie, feelie person. I have to force myself to go to social gatherings because I still view myself as the shy, overweight person I was as a child. If not for the beauty, humor, and self-confidence that I saw in my show dogs, I probably would not have entered or returned to the nursing homes. Because of the positive responses they received, I am now comfortable volunteering at nursing homes and leading an AAT/AAA program.

### **Conclusion**

AAA/AAT has taught me a lot about human-companion animal relationships. The animals who happily participate, the veterinary medical students who volunteer, and the nursing home residents whom we visit are



constantly surprising me with the richness of their interactions. In truth, I have come to realize that the most exciting thing about AAT/AAA may be that animals are connecting people to people. Research shows that animals may optimize the health and well-being of many people (Katcher, 2000) but maybe the true magic of AAT/AAA is not the human-animal bond but the human-animal-human bond.

### References

- Brown, S.E. (2007). Companion animals as self-objects. *Anthrozoos* 20(4), 329-343.
- Committee on the Human-Animal Bond. (1998). Committee C: Human-animal bond issues. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* 212(11), 1975.
- Katcher, A.H. (2000). The future of education and research on the animal-human bond and animal-assisted therapy. Part B: Animal-assisted therapy and the study of human-animal relationships: Discipline or bondage? Context or transitional object? In A. H. Fine (Ed.). *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundation and Guidelines for Practice* (pp. 461-473). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Schaffer, C.B., & Phillips, J. (1993). *The Tuskegee Behavior Test for Selecting Therapy Dogs* [Videotape and training manual]. Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine.

**Acknowledgment:** The Center for the Study of Human-Animal Interdependent Relationships that supports Dr. Schaffer's work in animal-assisted activities and therapy is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services' Health and Services Administration, Bureau of Health Professions under Tuskegee University's Center of Excellence in Minority Medical Education Grant. Dr. Schaffer thanks the Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine's volunteers and their companion animals who gave generously of their time and energy to nursing home residents in Tuskegee and the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System who brought animals into the lives of its residents by partnering with Tuskegee University.

Caroline Brunsman Schaffer, D.V.M., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences and founding director of the Center for the Study of Human-Animal Interdependent Relationships in the School of Veterinary Medicine at Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, Alabama. She is adviser to Tuskegee University's Human-Animal Bond/Animal Behavior Club and the Pets Uplifting People's Spirits (PUPS) Animal-Assisted Therapy/Animal-Assisted Activities Program. She was honored with the Leo K. Bustad Companion Animal Veterinarian of the Year Award in 2000 in recognition of her work in AAT/AAA and in HIV/AIDS and safe pet ownership. She earned her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree at The Ohio State University in 1971. After 11 years in small animal practice in Columbus, Ohio, and Hinsdale, Illinois, she worked as a research associate at Iowa State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. She moved to Tuskegee in 1987 where she has spent 17 of her last 20 years in human-animal bond and animal behavior activities. Comments concerning this article can be sent to: schaffertusvm@yahoo.com.



Charlotte Brunsman (Caroline's mother) with Pigweed. Photograph by Caroline Schaffer.

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.