

"HIS EARS ARE SO SOFT!"

VETPETS: AN ANIMAL-ASSISTED VISITATION/ ACTIVITY PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT THE PHILADELPHIA RONALD McDONALD HOUSE

Christina Bach, M.S.W., University of Pennsylvania

Animal-assisted activity and therapy programs (AAA/Ts) are becoming more common in various physical and mental health settings and with a variety of populations. VETPETS is an animal-assisted activity program sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Weekly volunteers from the school visit the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House (RMH) with certified therapy dogs. By partnering with Penn Vet, RMH is able to bring a little piece of home to the families residing there by acknowledging the importance of the human-animal bond and its impact on human physical and mental health. In addition, VETPETS provides much needed diversion, recreation, and social support to families who are often facing a life threatening or life altering medical crisis. This narrative describes the history, mission, and goals of VETPETS as well as highlights the experiences of children benefiting from the program at RMH.



Gus. Photograph by
Christina Bach

Every day on the way out the door to go to work, I review a mental checklist of what I need to take with me. Blackberry... check. Pager... check. Notepad... check. Beagle... check. Beagle? Who takes a beagle to work with them? I am the coordinator of an animal-assisted visitation program and a veterinary social worker and I am lucky enough to take my six-year-old beagle, Gus, to work with me on a regular basis. Gus has a job too – he is a companion animal who gives unconditional love and support to the children and families he interacts with as a therapy dog.

VETPETS is a unique collaborative relationship between the Ryan Veterinary Hospital (Ryan), the School of Veterinary Medicine of the University of Pennsylvania (Penn Vet), and the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House (RMH). RMH “provides a

home away from home for families of critically ill children receiving treatment at local hospitals” (Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House, May, 2008). Each week human volunteers (all staff, faculty, students, or alumni of Penn Vet or Ryan) and their therapy-certified dogs visit children and families residing at RMH. The two facilities are just three blocks apart; thus, the connection between the agencies was easy to build and maintain. However, it is only in the last year that the program has begun to establish itself more formally as an animal-assisted visitation/activity program with a mission statement and action toward the development of policies, procedures, and guidelines for volunteers, both human and canine.

History of VETPETS

The idea of taking animals to the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House was the brain child of a veterinary student in the early 1980's. She approached the Dean of the Veterinary School, who directed her to the social worker. Together, they approached the administration at RMH and VETPETS came into existence. Animals were first evaluated by the behavior staff (behavior veterinary assistants) at Penn Vet. Then, volunteers were

instructed to focus on recreation. Families were provided with Polaroid photos of the children with the animals. There was no formal mission statement, organizational structure, goals, grievance procedure, or evaluation of the program. Animals were not required to be formally certified as therapy dog by groups such as the Delta Society or Therapy Dog International. Despite the lack of program formality, VETPETS was able to sustain itself throughout the years due to recruitment of volunteers by the social worker at Penn Vet.

The Missions of Ronald McDonald House and VETPETS: A Perfect Complement

In a recent study by the American Veterinary Association, the number of U.S. households with pets climbed by 7.6 million, to 59 percent of all homes, up from 58 percent in 2001 (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2008). In other studies it was found that 80 percent of households with children also have pets (American Veterinary Medical Association, 1993; Beck, 1996; Spence, 2002). Given the number of children with companion animals in the home and the number of families coping with chronic illness, it is clear that pets play a key role in providing love and companionship and improving quality of life (Spence & Kaiser, 2002). Therefore if children with chronic illnesses are already benefiting from companion animals in their homes, it is logical to bring the benefits of that relationship to them when they are not at home.

Due to medical conditions, allergies, and space, RMH does not allow families to bring pets with them during their stay. By partnering with Penn Vet, RMH is able to bring that little piece of home to the families and recognizes the importance of the human-animal bond and its impact/influence on human physical and mental health. In addition, VETPETS provides much needed diversion, recreation, and social support to families who are often facing a life threatening or life altering medical crisis.

I took on the role of Coordinator of VETPETS in September of 2007 as part of my job as Director of Veterinary Social Work and Pet Bereavement Services at Penn Vet.

After observing and participating in the program for nine months, it became clear to me that VETPETS desperately needed guidelines, structure, and a mission statement to continue to be a viable, vibrant, valid, sustainable animal-assisted activity program as well as potentially to expand to other sites. I utilized the Delta Society's *Animal-Assisted Therapy Standards of Practice* (1996) and Ann R. Howe's *Starting a Visiting Animal Group* to help guide the development of the VETPETS mission statement, structure, and goals. In identifying the mission of the program, we, as a group with common purpose, can also establish short- and long-term goals for the program, including Therapy Dog International certification for all participating dogs, development of an interdisciplinary advisory committee, website development, and possible expansion to other sites. I have developed web resources and photo sharing for parents through the Penn Vet website. This enables parents to share photos and stories from VETPETS with relatives and friends all over the country.

The mission of VETPETS now is "to enrich the lives of patients and families residing at the Philadelphia Ronald McDonald House by providing high quality animal-assisted activities/visitation by members of the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine/Ryan Veterinary Hospital community" (VETPETS Policy Manual, June 2008). The immediate goals of the VETPETS' program include development of a policy manual and volunteer orientation program, Therapy Dog International certification for all canine volunteers, creation of an interdisciplinary advisory committee, and recruitment of more veterinary student volunteers. The development of an interdisciplinary advisory committee, made up of representatives from RMH, Penn Vet and VETPETS, will assist in making decisions about VETPETS' goals and future direction. The advisory committee is also essential in the development of a grievance policy to help manage any conflict within the organization.

At this time, RMH is the only site available for visitation by VETPETS volunteers. In the future, other sites, such as the Living Independently for Elders (LIFE) Day Program and the Inpatient Hospice Unit of Penn Homecare and Hospice, may be included. Should expansion of the VETPETS program occur, the mission statement will need to be altered to incorporate other sites and the needs of other types of clients.

Definitions of Animal-Assisted Therapy/Activities (AAT/A) and Benefits of Participating in Animal Assisted Visitation/Activities

Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) provide an opportunity for relaxation, play, and learning as part of an informal visitation by an individual or group of companion animals and their owner/handlers. In AAA, the emphasis is on utilization of the presence of companion animals to improve quality of life. AAA may be provided by volunteer owners/handlers who are co-certified with their pets as animal therapy teams. Animal-assisted activities differ from animal-assisted therapy (AAT) in that AAT is part of a variety of clinical encounters with a trained mental health provider whereby the animal is utilized as a therapeutic tool. The presence of the animal during the therapy session serves the client's and therapist's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical treatment plans and goals (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). When developing and maintaining a program such as VETPETS, it is important for volunteers to recognize the difference between AAA and AAT and embrace the unique roles and functions of AAA in this setting.

AAA can be beneficial to physical and mental health and emotional well-being. Per Dr. Alan Beck, "Pets help children, improving their morale, and are a welcomed distraction" (personal communication, June 6, 2008). The literature about AAA/T clearly demonstrates that AAA/T provides participants with emotional support, diversion, recreation, sensory integration/tactile benefits, social support, companionship, and relief of symptoms of pain and stress. AAA/T can decrease anxiety and isolation and

homesickness (if provided in a residential setting, such as VETPETS). AAA/T programs also teach children, through modeling, how to interact safely with animals, the potential benefits to humans and animals from the relationship, and humane and responsible care of a companion animal (Allen, 1997; Burch, Bustad, Duncan, Fredrickson, & Tebay, 1995; Cole, Gawlinski, Lindquist, & Kirksey 2000; Friedmann, 1995; Kaminski, Pellino, & Wish, 2002; Triebenbacher, 1998).

VETPETS introduces or continues this type of relationship among children and their families residing at RMH. Serpell writes, "...animals...are able to induce an immediate physiologically derousing state of relaxation simply by attracting and holding our attention...companion animals are capable of providing people with a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support" (Serpell, 2006, p. 15). Above all, VETPETS supports Serpell's notion of animals contributing to human well-being.

Lauren's Story

I headed to RMH on a warm spring night in early April. My role that night was as a photographer since the program had just purchased some new digital equipment for instant printing. We provide the children/parents with photographs of themselves with the dogs: posing, interacting, and playing. That was the first night I met Lauren. She was instantly drawn to the dogs as she walked out of the dining area after dinner. She got right down on the floor and started to stroke Taylor, a yellow lab who lost her tail after an injury and was subsequently abandoned. Taylor's owner, a veterinarian, rescued her and nursed her back to health after her amputation. Taylor is a joy, with a constant "dog smile." She loves to have her tummy rubbed. The bond between Taylor and Lauren was immediate.

There were six dogs there that night and Lauren made her "rounds" to each one, making new friends, hearing their stories, and relaxing. I madly snapped photos of Lauren; she quickly became my muse. When I told Lauren this, she asked, "What is a muse?" I said, "It means you inspire me."

While she was playing with the dogs, I talked with Lauren's mom, Marianne. She said that they would be staying at RMH for several weeks while Lauren underwent treatment. While Lauren visited with the dogs, Marianne had some time to unwind and watch her daughter joyfully interact with the canine volunteers and their loving owners.

Aside from taking photos, I had Gus with me that night. Lauren instantly formed a friendship with Gus. She would talk with me about him and what he enjoyed doing, all the while stroking his ears, proclaiming, "His ears are so soft." What I didn't know about Lauren at that time was that she is blind in one eye and has minimal vision in her other secondary to tumors on her optic nerve. The tactile interaction that Lauren had with animals was that much more significant for her given her impaired vision.

As the weeks of Lauren's treatment went on, she looked forward to every Wednesday evening. She developed relationships with each of the dogs and their owners. She loved watching Dolce do his tricks. Dolce is a parvovirus survivor rescued by an emergency veterinary at Ryan. Dolce loves to dance. Lauren smiled and laughed as Dolce spun around on his hind legs.

As her treatment continued, I felt myself developing a strong connection to Lauren and her mom, and I looked forward to seeing her interact with the dogs every week. VETPETS also helped Lauren's mom overcome a fear of most dogs. She enjoyed watching her daughter relax, laugh, and be a child while she played with the animals. This was a welcome diversion from the daily life of coping with Lauren's illness. Through relationships with animals, Lauren and Marianne built trust, comfort, and rapport with the canine and human volunteers.

In interviewing Lauren for this article, she shared her story with me. This is Lauren's medical story, from her Caring Bridge pages, written by her mom. (Caring Bridge is an online community providing free personalized websites that support and connect loved ones during critical illness, treatment, and recovery).

Lauren was born with a genetic disorder called Neurofibromatosis Type I. NF1 is an autosomal dominant genetic disorder which causes tumors to grow along nerves and can affect the development of non-nervous tissues such as bones and skin. It causes tumors to grow anywhere on or in the body and may lead to developmental abnormalities. It is the most common neurological disorder caused by a single gene, affecting one in every 4,000 births. ...As a result of NF, Lauren developed brain tumors, bilateral optic and hypothalamic gliomas, just before her second birthday. She had been on chemotherapy for about four years, with periods of progression and stability, and development of a new lesion in her brain stem, when she developed Evan's Syndrome, a rare blood disorder in which the body makes antibodies that destroy red cells, platelets and white blood cells. Her chemotherapy for the brain tumors had to be discontinued, and a different chemotherapy, coupled with synthetic steroids, was introduced to try and control the blood disorder. In the meantime, vision in her "good" eye had deteriorated. She started back on a new chemotherapy regimen in the fall of 2004. It kept her stable until January 2006, at which time scans showed that one of her tumors more than doubled in size. She was enrolled in a Phase I clinical trial of Lenalidomide from January 2006 until March 2007, at which time she developed demyelination in her cerebrum and had to discontinue. Most recently, she was

diagnosed with malignant peripheral nerve sheath tumor, an aggressive soft tissue sarcoma....Like so many children battling brain tumors, both the disease and the side effects of treatment have taken their toll on Lauren. She is blind in one eye and has visual deficits in the other. Her endocrine functions have been affected, requiring treatment, and chemotherapy has damaged some of the nerves in her extremities, requiring leg braces. She has endured surgeries; needle sticks; port flushes; bone marrow biopsies; blood transfusions; chemotherapy infusions; hospital stays; physical, occupational, and speech therapies; and too many doctors' visits to count. Despite all she has been through, she is a happy, enthusiastic, and optimistic child, with a crazy, infectious laugh and a true love for life. She takes great joy in helping others, finds treasure in what others may see as ordinary or mundane, and never lets a day go by without some kind of exciting discovery. No matter what challenges are placed before her, she never gives up. Her courage, resiliency, and relentless spirit are an inspiration to those who know her. (Loose, 2008)

Lauren completed her treatment after five weeks and it was time to say goodbye. When I asked Lauren what she liked best about VETPETS, she said, "Everything. It is just amazing." In email communication with Lauren's mom after Lauren returned home, Marianne told me that Lauren talks about VETPETS regularly, shares her photographs with friends, and has wonderful memories of her canine interactions during her lengthy

treatment. For Lauren, VETPETS was an "exciting discovery."

The Garcias' Story

It was another Wednesday night at RMH and the atmosphere brought about by VETPETS was excited and joyous. Six dogs and their owners were present. There were also many children and families that evening. The children were thrilled to play with the dogs, feed them treats, watch them do tricks, and hug them. A young girl, Ana, around age 14, approached Gus. I had talked with her on previous occasions. Her family had been staying at the house for several months. Her two younger sisters (ages eight and three) had always been particularly interactive with the pets, but Ana was more like the observant, parentified child. She watched over her sisters with pride, joy, and a protective stance. Tonight, Ana seemed different. She sat down and started to gently pet Gus. "We are going home tonight," she said. I responded, "That's good. Are you happy to be going home?" Ana continued to pet Gus, took a deep breath, and told me, "Well yes, but...we are taking my brother home...not the way we wanted to. He died." She then proceeded to tell me about Miguel. He was 18 months old and had been sick his whole life. They had been staying at RMH for over eight months and were always hopeful. Sadly, Miguel lost his fight. Ana's mother was watching nearby. She spoke very little English but seemed to know that Ana was telling me about what happened. Quickly, she pulled out a huge photo album of Miguel and shared photos of him with me. We hugged and cried together. Gus served as a catalyst for Ana and her mom to share their grief. Before they left, Ana's mom asked if I would take a photo of her three girls with Gus. In the photo, the girls are all smiling, happy, and joyful, despite this being a time of great sadness for the family.

The Inspiration of Children: Implications for Social Work Practice and the Future of VETPETS

Through these personal experiences as a volunteer and coordinator of VETPETS, I have become especially aware of the importance

of pets in therapeutic, non-traditional clinical settings. I am inspired to educate other social workers about the importance of animal-assisted activities and therapies. Social workers should embrace the role of vehicle in the initiation, coordination, and continuance of AAA visitation programs at various sites throughout our communities. The power of group organization and visitation (in contrast to an individual visiting independently with a therapy-certified animal) helps to build community coalitions and relationships between agencies that might never before have interacted. Group visitation as a member of an AAA/T organization provides the opportunity to confront challenging situations in the setting together, counters isolation, inspires members to return, instills hope, encourages sharing of mutual experiences, provides an opportunity to share information, and above all reinforces and supports the sense of altruism experienced by volunteering with such a program. These are parallel opportunities and experiences demonstrated in psychotherapy support groups (Yalom, 2005).

Organizational structure, policies, and procedures in AAA/T and visitation programs yield program viability and success. AAA programs that reach out to children can also provide a unique opportunity for humane education regarding safe, effective, and positive pet ownership as demonstrated by the volunteers.

I'm inspired not only by the participants in the VETPETS program, but also by the energy, vitality, and exuberance of the program itself. In the future I hope to expand the program by building coalitions with other possible sites and reaching out to other populations (the dying, the elderly). This will also present new opportunities for practice in AAA/T and research. In devoting time to the development of a mission statement, program structure and goals, and volunteer guidelines, the credibility and viability of VETPETS as a community outreach AAA program has been reinforced and validated. Through further development of volunteer guidelines, training, and a volunteer handbook, as well as with the

guidance of our advisory committee, VETPETS is expected to grow and prosper.

In developing helping relationships with children and families with the assistance of my faithful companion Gus, I have discovered a new method of clinical social work practice that has become a most rewarding, professionally fulfilling experience. Watching Gus with the children, seeing smiles, hearing laughter, generating a release of stress and anxiety, taking photos, hearing stories...it makes Wednesday night the most exciting night of the week and...it's *work*.

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- Note:** Lauren's and Marianne's names are used with permission. The names of the Garcia family have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
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- Christina Bach, M.S.W., L.S.W., is the Director of Veterinary Social Work and Pet Bereavement Services at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. Ms. Bach is also a research associate with the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. She has a keen interest in the study of relationships between humans and animals, in particular, human-canine relationships. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: bachce@vet.upenn.edu

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