

Eunice Smith Home Welcomes Four-Legged ‘Staff Member’

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Staff members at Eunice Smith Nursing Home probably find themselves wishing at times that they had an extra hand or two. There's one new helper there with four legs.

The newest member of the ESH team is a Chocolate Labrador Retriever named Darby. She is in training to become a certified therapy pet, a challenge that Darby has accepted with an enthusiastic wag of her tail.

“I feel that Darby has the perfect combination of traits for this kind of work -- a calm, friendly demeanor and an eagerness to please her human counterparts,” says Mark Jeffries, administrator at Eunice Smith and Darby’s owner.

Darby was purchased from Sievers Retrievers -- a breeder of all types of Labs and Golden Retrievers based in Calhoun County, Ill. -- this spring during the Alton Memorial Health Services Foundation’s Duck Pluckers Ball, an annual event to raise funds for new AMH ambulances.

The process that an animal and trainer go through for pet therapy certification through organizations such as Therapy Dogs International is long and challenging. The dog must be at least 1 year old and meet several personality criteria such as a calm temperament just to be considered for testing. Once the initial criteria is met and training is completed, the dog undergoes a 13-station examination procedure that tests the dog’s ability to respond appropriately under many stressful situations, such as reaction to children, visiting with a resident as well as following commands flawlessly to ensure that the dog can be trusted.

Darby was born in February and Jeffries says she already shows great potential and a desire to learn. Jeffries brings Darby with him to Eunice Smith Home daily and is conducting the training personally. A new command is introduced every few weeks to make sure Darby is ready for her exam.

“Compliance to commands is crucial for certification and shows that the dog is mature enough to analyze multiple environments and respond to diverse situations appropriately,” he said. “One of the most interesting commands is called ‘LEAVE IT.’ The trainer places an object, such as a scrap of food, nearby and as the dog approaches the item the command is called out. Her response must be to leave the object alone. That goes against her natural instincts, especially with food. The reason for the command is to ensure that if residents have food with them, that Darby will not try to eat the item or lick the resident during a visit. This command is a new concept for me but Darby has mastered it very quickly. I am confident that she will pass her exam with flying colors.”

Jeffries registered Darby for her initial evaluation in August and will continue her training for several more months.

Darby's mere presence at Eunice Smith Home serves as an icebreaker for families who are not familiar with the nursing home environment.

"It is such a pleasure to have Darby here everyday," says Kathy Strow, the Business Office manager at ESH. "Residents, families and guests love to see her. I even have family members bring their children to the home just to see Darby. She has brought a new dimension to the already stellar care that we provide here."