DAILY PILOT

Therapy retriever makes days golden at Costa Mesa women's rehab

By **HILLARY DAVIS**   MAY 04, 2018 | 7:35 PM

David Hertzberg encourages Cascada Ladines, 3, to pet his therapy dog Lola, a 6-year-old golden retriever, at the New Directions for Women Foundation rehab facility in Costa Mesa on Thursday. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

A golden retriever named Lola is helping women overcome substance abuse just by being herself.

Lola is the new therapy dog at the New Directions for Women Foundation, a residential facility in Costa Mesa where women can seek treatment for drug and alcohol addiction while living with their children.

Lola is a natural at her job, said owner David Hertzberg, who lives in Newport Beach. When the two visit New Directions' Eastside campus, Lola cheerfully greets every person, calmly lets toddlers run their hands over her cotton candy-soft ginger-colored fur and presents her belly for rubs.

She seems to have a knack for knowing who's having a rough day and is quick to make friends, Hertzberg said.

Hertzberg understands the tribulations of addiction. His adult daughter struggles with alcoholism, and he and his wife get their own therapy through the support group Al-Anon, where Lola also is a participant. She knows when they've arrived at the meeting and will eagerly approach the door because she knows the regulars.

"It's amazing to watch this dog work a room," Hertzberg said.

Tania Bhattacharyya, New Directions' executive director, said that before meeting Lola, the center had considered adopting a dog to live onsite. The facility, in a residential neighborhood, is a group of houses with large, fenced yards. It houses up to 34 women and six children. But Bhattacharyya said that could be a stressful living situation for the animal.

"It's been a dream of ours to have a therapy dog to visit us," she said.

Hertzberg connected with the facility during its recent annual fundraiser.

Lola is about 6 years old, with a frost of white hair on her face that shows her age. Her soft eyes and natural smile show her sunny disposition, and people perk up when they see her, Bhattacharyya said.

She referenced a study of therapy dog use at a rehab in New York that showed the dogs made people more open and trusting. Bhattacharyya added that addiction is a disease of isolation and is self-defeating, and Lola provides the unconditional kindness that its sufferers have been missing.

Lola, a 6-year-old golden retriever, is a therapy dog for clients of the New Directions for Women Foundation in Costa Mesa. (Scott Smeltzer / Staff Photographer)

Lola was certified in February through a program called Pet Partners. Hertzberg said she met most of the requirements already: solid obedience and unflappability in chaotic or unfamiliar medical settings. He completed the handler training online in his spare time before an in-person evaluation.

He didn't adopt Lola with therapy work in mind. His previous dog, a pug, had died about a year before he adopted Lola from the Golden Retriever Rescue of Greater Los Angeles in 2012. She was still a pup, about a year old.

After his wife, who works in a hospital, mentioned seeing therapy dogs, he put the two together.

Lola isn't an assistance animal, which have more regimented and highly specialized abilities, typically for people with disabilities or other medical disorders. She's a pet that happens to make people happy. She loves her squeaky ball, hard-boiled eggs and love itself; Hertzberg calls her a "love dog" because it "oozes from her pores."

Hertzberg said he's happy to take Lola anywhere where she can be a "love dog." He plans to take her to Edison High School in Huntington Beach at the end of the semester to ease the stress of final exams.

Hertzberg said volunteers tend to get even more out of their work than the people they serve. He said that's true tor Lola.

"Look at her right now," he said. "Her tail is wagging; she couldn't be happier."

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