

A Smooch From A Very Special Pooch

by Jacob Barker

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Nuns and residents aren't the only ones praying in the chapel at Kirkwood's St. Agnes Home. Among the prayerful is a canine companion named Noah — a black labrador retriever.

"He prays the rosary with the residents, and they get a kick out of it," said Sister Mary Michael, the retirement home's social service assistant. "I'll kneel down to lead it and he'll lay down next to me. Sometimes I'm worried that the residents are more distracted with him than with the praying."

Support Dogs Incorporated, a St. Louis based charity organization, donates specially trained dogs to retirement homes, hospitals and private individuals through its pet therapy program. The organization trains dogs to aid the deaf, immobile and those in need of companionship.

When Support Dogs Inc. placed a dog at another Catholic retirement home, Our Lady of Good Counsel, word of the program's success spread to St. Agnes. Noah is trained to be gentle with the elderly and with children, and is used at St. Agnes to cheer up residents.

"The nuns at St. Agnes heard how wonderful the dog was (at Our Lady of Good Counsel), and decided a dog would be a great idea at St. Agnes," said Robyn James, executive director of Support Dogs Inc. "Noah is a service dog that needed to be placed in that type of facility."

Although it took a little time for some residents and sisters at St. Agnes to warm up to Noah, he has since become a joy to many residents. Sister Mary Michael, who is in charge of Noah, said many residents respond better to animals than to people, and that Noah's presence has helped give the facility a more home-like atmosphere.

"A lot of the residents have to give up their animals and pets when they come here," she said. "Most of all, Noah is for them, for those who really like animals."

Many residents have grown quite fond of Noah and consider him their dog.

"It's really good for those residents who did have to leave their pet at home," Sister Mary Michael said. "They'll say, 'I love my dog at home, but Noah, you're number two.'"

Noah goes to work each day from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., walking with Sister Mary Michael from room to room to visit with residents.

"A lot of residents are extremely excited. They just light up as he comes through the door," Sister Mary said. "We don't have anyone who doesn't like him. Some would rather just look at Noah, they don't really want him to come close, but most residents

really enjoy him.”

Though Noah has been at St. Agnes since June, he is still owned by Support Dogs Inc. Every few weeks the organization sends a trainer to check on the dogs that have been donated. There is continued training, and trainers make sure the dogs are being treated well.

“They get a certain dog to fit your situation, and they wait until they think they have that certain dog,” Sister Mary Patrick, who also helps take care of Noah, said. “We waited for almost a year for Noah, and then they finally found him and thought he was the perfect dog for us.”

While Noah has grown used to living at the convent with the sisters, it took a while for him to get accustomed to the environment at the retirement center.

“At the beginning, he would pull me and get a little bit excited, but as soon as we got to the rooms, he was like, ‘I know I’m working,’ and would stay right next to my side,” Sister Mary Michael said. “The goal in the future is for him to be walking around by himself and to be around for the residents to make it feel like home.”

Noah’s trainer from Support Dogs Inc. is still working with him so that he can walk around the facility by himself. The sisters hope to use him for visits to the childcare center they also run on the property.

Despite Noah’s professional training, by all appearances he’s just a normal dog.

“We all joke that he wouldn’t make a good sister or brother because he’s not good at detachment,” Sister Mary Michael said. “He loves his ball too much.”